

A man and a woman in 19th-century attire are embracing in a mountain landscape. The man is wearing a white shirt, dark suspenders, and a black hat. The woman is wearing a white blouse and a long, full teal skirt. They are standing in a green field with mountains in the background under a blue sky with clouds.

Mail Order Man

*A
Brides of Beckham
Story*

Kirsten Osbourne

USA TODAY bestselling author

Mail Order Man

A Brides of Beckham Story

Kirsten Osbourne

Copyright © 2021 by Kirsten Osbourne
Unlimited Dreams Publishing

All rights reserved.

Cover design by Erin Dameron Hill/ EDH Graphics

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author. The only exception is by a reviewer, who may quote short excerpts in a review.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Kirsten Osbourne

Visit my website at www.kirstenandmorganna.com

Printed in the United States of America

Sign up for instant notification of all of Kirsten's New Releases Text
'BOB' to 42828

And

For a complete list of Kirsten's works head to her website
www.kirstenandmorganna.com

Chapter One

Charlotte Watkins walked into her home, pulled off her work gloves and sat down, only then checking to be certain her five-year-old son, Walt, was with her. He followed her everywhere, rarely speaking, so she didn't have to worry much. "Are you hungry?" she asked, knowing he had to be. They'd been on the range working since before sun-up with only a couple of sandwiches for lunch. It was like that every day since her husband had passed.

At Walt's nod, she smiled, removing his hat from his head. "Remember, good manners say that we need to take our hats off in the house." Sometimes she wondered why she bothered teaching him the right way to do things when it would be so much easier to just keep him at her side, but she knew the way she was raised wasn't the right way for Walt.

She stood up, aching in every inch of her body, but it couldn't matter. She had work that had to be done, and she was going to do it. "How about eggs and bacon?"

Walt didn't answer, but she didn't let it bother her anymore. Before her husband, Howard's death, she'd been obsessed with the words Walt didn't speak. Now? She was obsessed with keeping the ranch running and putting food on the table.

It wasn't that she was lacking funds. She'd tried to hire men, and they'd all given her lewd looks. Unfortunately, her reputation preceded her, and no man would work for her unless he was looking for something more than a paycheck.

She quickly heated up the stove, which was welcome on the cool spring evening, and she made the eggs and bacon she knew her son would eat. He was a finicky eater, but it didn't bother her. Charlotte simply didn't have time to let anything bother her anymore. There was work, and there was more work. She and Walt made it into town every Sunday morning for church, and then they returned home, she put on her trousers, and got right back to work.

Thankfully, Walt seemed to think working with her was the best thing he could possibly do. He never complained, and he always had a smile on his face for her.

Branding was coming up though, and she couldn't handle it on her own. She had about two months to find someone who would help her. For a moment, she thought about asking some of the other ranchers if they would loan her their men, but she knew better. The men would expect to warm her bed and not just help with the calves.

After supper she was going to have to break down and write a letter—a letter asking for a mail-order man. One who wouldn't look at her as if she was a piece of meat. Hopefully anyone she married would treat her as well as her dear Howard had. He'd never minded that she'd spent the first sixteen years of her life pretending to be a boy. He was the only one who hadn't minded or thought less of her as a result.

Later, once Walt was sound asleep, she sat down at the dining table, and she wrote her letter, wishing for the umpteenth time it wasn't necessary.

To whom it may concern:

I need a husband...

Elizabeth Tandy turned the letter over in her hand before opening it. This was her favorite part of her job—savoring each letter and each story that came with the letters. As she read the first lines of this one, she knew this wasn't her usual kind of job. No, this one would involve sending a man instead of a woman, which was very rare for her. She tended to just send her brothers out because there were so many of them, and not one of them cared to spend his time doing anything but hard labor. Ranching and farming were perfect fits for them.

As she read through the entire letter, she knew exactly whom she should send to the widow Watkins—now the hard part would be convincing him that he needed to go.

She put the letter into her reticule, and she called out for her husband, Bernard. Bernard had started as her butler and man about town, but now he was so much more. They'd only been married two years, and they had a beautiful little boy.

Bernard popped his head into her office, his face serious, but when he saw she was alone, he joined her in the room, his arms going about her. "Yes, my love?"

"I have to convince Earl to move to Montana to marry."

"Your brother? A widow?" he asked, always understanding her.

Earl had fallen in love not three full years before, but his fiancée had met with a terrible accident, and she'd lost her life. Elizabeth nodded. "A widow with a little boy who doesn't speak."

"I see. Yes, it sounds as if Earl is the man for the job. He's been

asking around for some farmland, but no one is selling anything he's interested in."

"The Widow Watkins is a rancher, and though it's not farming, I have a feeling Earl won't mind. She lost her husband a few months back, and due to her reputation, none of the men in town will work for her without expecting a great deal more than a paycheck."

"Oh, dear! Where did she get her reputation?"

"I don't know, but I have a feeling Earl won't mind whatever it is."

"I'll get the baby. You get the pram ready."

Elizabeth smiled, standing on tiptoe to kiss her husband. "You know my life is only wonderful because you're a part of it, right?"

"I feel the same about you, my love."

Earl Miller was dreaming again. Daydreaming about land that was his that he could plant whatever he wanted on. For instance, he was certain that they'd make the most money from potatoes, while his father clung to what his father had done before him—dairy farming, and only planting enough crops for your animals for the year. It felt so short-sighted to Earl.

As he stood with his shoulder against the pillar that barely held up his parents' porch roof, he spotted his sister and her husband driving up to the house. The snow had barely melted, and he wanted to call out to Bernard that he was going to get stuck in the mud, but he held his tongue. He had always thought of Elizabeth as his favorite sister, but now that she'd gotten rich...well, it felt different. He wasn't

as comfortable with her as he had been.

He raised a hand in a wave. "What are you doing out here?" After a moment, he remembered his manners and went to take his nephew Michael from Elizabeth while Bernard handed her down. Earl loved his nephews and nieces something fierce, and wished he had kids of his own, but since Patsy's death, it was hard to think of another woman that way.

"We came to see you," Elizabeth announced, not reaching out for her son, so Earl just cradled the boy against him.

"Oh? What'd you do that for?" He knew something had to be up for them to drive through the mud in their fancy buggy.

Elizabeth smiled. "Let's go inside and I'll show you."

"Show me? You're not trying to get me to go west and marry a stranger, are you? I'm not going to be someone's mail order man." His sister had a one-track mind where her business was concerned. He knew if that's what she wanted, she'd push until it happened.

"Let's go inside," his sister insisted.

He groaned. She *did* want him to be a mail order husband. Didn't she know he'd already had his heart broken by the only woman who would ever truly matter to him? "Okay, but you can argue all you want. I'm not marrying some stranger."

He led the way into his parents' house and into the dining room, which had a huge, long table for all the siblings and their parents. Their family had filled half the schoolhouse by themselves. He waited as Elizabeth and Bernard sat, but he stood, still holding the baby and making faces at it. "Say what you're going to say."

Elizabeth smiled. "Give me my son and take this letter. It's for you. I know it is."

Earl groaned as they made the swap, and he plopped down into a chair beside his sister. "No, I missed you, Earl. No, you're my favorite brother. No, from you it's 'Give me my baby and read this letter you don't want to read from a stranger you don't care to know.' I don't know why I love you."

Elizabeth just laughed. Bernard was stoic as always, sitting there like a huge blond thundercloud across the table.

He glanced down at the letter and started reading.

To whom it may concern:

I need a husband. I was married to a wonderful man for more than seven years, and I have a five-year-old son who desperately misses his father. I own a large ranch in Montana, and no man will work for me. Well, they will, but with my reputation in town—which is undeserved—men will work for me, but they expect a great deal more from me than a weekly paycheck. I cannot do the branding and castrating of the young calves alone. I must have help.

I've thought and thought about the best way to do things, and the only answer is for a man who has never met me, and therefor doesn't believe I'm a woman of loose morals, to come here and marry me. I cannot give up the ranch my husband worked so hard for, but I also can't run it alone. I need help, and I pray that you can find a good man for me to marry. My son, Walt, needs a father. He doesn't speak much, and I hope I

can help with that, but it's not enough to play word games while we work together. A five-year-old shouldn't be out working on the range anyway. I need a partner in life, though I don't necessarily need a husband, if that makes sense. Do not come here planning to have me in your bed immediately, because it won't happen. Eventually, I hope there's something between us, but I do not see it happening quickly.

I live outside of Mountain Home, Montana, and it's as beautiful as it sounds. I promise coming all this way and marrying a lonely widow woman is worth it. I'm only twenty-three, and I hope to have more children someday, so please enjoy children and be of good health. And most importantly, be ready to work. You don't even need to respond. Anyone here can point you toward the Watkins Ranch and crazy Widow Watkins.

Sincerely,

Charlotte Watkins

Earl looked at Elizabeth with a frown. "It sounds like the townspeople aren't as kind and loving as they could be. Poor woman has a young son and no help. No man can run a ranch on his own, let alone a woman."

"I know," Elizabeth said softly, looking at him as if she expected an immediate answer. "She needs someone soon."

"But I refuse to fall in love again," he said.

"She's not looking for that right away. You saw what she said. She wants to take time to get to know the man she marries first. I think she was very wise to lay it all out as she did."

"I think so too," Earl said, staring at the letter. "You know what? I'll do it. If I could just take my horse on a train..." He hated giving into his sister so quickly, but she was right. That letter spoke straight to his heart, and he knew he was the man who needed to be there, helping her and her son.

Bernard spoke then for the first time. Earl found the man downright creepy the way he watched over Elizabeth so silently. "You can. They will keep it in a cattle car, and you can pick it up when you reach your destination. I do it most every time I travel. I prefer my well-trained horse to one I can rent in a stable."

"I didn't know that was even a possibility." Earl thought about it for a moment. "She doesn't want me to wait either. I could leave tomorrow. Dad sure doesn't need me with so many of us." He really did wish he was needed at home, but there was nothing for him to do there that any of his brothers couldn't.

"No, he really doesn't. And you would own your own land. Maybe it's land meant to be ranched, but you could still grow whatever you wanted. I'm sure your wife wouldn't be upset at all having help with her kitchen garden."

"You're right." He took a deep breath. "What about this reputation thing?"

Elizabeth shrugged. "You didn't mind Patsy's reputation."

"That was different. I loved Patsy."

"You were the only man in town willing to look past her reputation and court her. Do you realize she came to me and inquired about being a mail-order bride as soon as she got back?"

Earl shook his head. He hated the idea of Patsy being married to another man. She was the love of his life, and he'd never love another woman half as much as he'd loved her, despite what she'd been through in her past. "Could I get a train ticket for tomorrow, do you think?"

Elizabeth smiled, nodding. "*I know* you could."

"What's Ma going to think if another of us goes out west and marries a stranger?" Earl asked, grinning.

"She'll say, 'One less mouth to feed. Praise God.'"

Earl laughed. It did sound like their mother. "I'll get everything packed and head out first thing in the morning. I'm marrying Charlotte Watkins."

Elizabeth smiled. "Want me to break the news to the family?"

He shook his head. "No need. They're used to us taking off at a moment's notice."

For the rest of the day, Earl thought about the things he would need for his trip out west, taking everything he owned, though it wasn't much. He'd never moved away from his parents' house because there'd never been a need. Everything he wanted and needed was right there, and his work had always been helping his pa.

After he'd packed everything and gotten ready for bed, he prayed to the Lord that the woman was a good Christian woman who really did need a man like him. He prayed that whatever had garnered her reputation was a falsehood, just as it had been for his Patsy.

As he fell asleep that night, he knew without a doubt in his mind, he was doing the right thing. Both for himself and the Widow

Watkins.

Chapter Two

Charlotte was exhausted. She stumbled into the house at the end of a long, hard day with Walt behind her. She would have skipped supper if it wasn't for her son, but she knew she couldn't. He needed to eat regularly, even if she felt she could skip a meal here and there in favor of sleep.

Walking through the house, she could see that someone had done some cleaning, which made no sense to her at all. And then she caught a whiff of beef cooking. There was no mistaking the smell. Someone was in her home, and they were cooking and cleaning? Who would do such a thing?

She reached for the rifle off the wall in the entryway and sneaked toward the kitchen, whispering to Walt to stay where he was.

She stepped into the kitchen with the rifle at her shoulder, aimed at a tall, shirtless man. "Who are you, and why are you in my kitchen?"

The man turned toward her with a grin on his face, and oh dear, the grin—not to mention the bare chest—made her weak in the knees. "I'm Earl Miller. I just got here on the train this morning, and I wanted to eat before we headed into town to marry, so I figured I'd cook for all three of us, since you were probably out doing the work of twelve men. This is a big spread, and a little lady like you will hurt herself trying to do it all on her own."

Charlotte blinked a couple of times. "Marry?"

"Sure, I'm the mail-order man you sent for."

He gave the pot another stir, looking past her to Walt. “Well, hello there. I’m Earl.”

There was no sound from behind her, and Charlotte wasn’t quite ready to lower her rifle just yet. “If you’re the man I sent for, who was the letter addressed to?”

Earl smiled. “Elizabeth Tandy of Rock Creek Road Beckham, Massachusetts. She’s my big sister.”

At his confirmation of where she’d sent the letter, she lowered the rifle. “What do you know about ranching?”

He shrugged. “I know all there is to know about dairy farming. I also know about growing crops, which I wish my father had done more of and less of the dairy farming. I’m a fast learner.”

She gave a slight nod. “And a hard worker, I see.” Looking around she could tell he’d done a great deal more than she’d first thought.

“Always have been. My parents raised me to work.”

“So, you weren’t one of those hellions always getting into trouble at school.”

When his face reddened slightly, she couldn’t help but smile. “You were!”

He nodded once. “I was. My brothers and sisters and I were known around town as the demon horde. If you were driving along and getting pelted by apples, you sure knew which farm to stop at to tell the parents about it.”

“And your parents punished you?” she asked.

Earl shook his head. “Nah. There were too many of us. They

were tired just doing their best to keep us alive. We pretty much ran wild, getting into trouble and having a blast doing it.”

She chuckled. “Sounds like you weren’t raised to do hard work after all.”

He shrugged. “We all figured out in our own time that hard work was what was expected. And we changed our ways, one after the other.”

Charlotte couldn’t help but be charmed by the shirtless man in her kitchen. “I’d say I’m too tired to head into town to marry today, but I can’t let you stay here without marriage first. Even if you were to stay in a room separate from mine. My reputation is bad enough as it is.”

“Why is your reputation so bad?” he asked, ladling stew into three bowls. He pulled a pan of biscuits from the oven and put them into the center of the table.

She followed her nose to the food and sat down, thrilled to not have to cook for a change. “I was found as an infant along the side of the road by a mountain man. He didn’t know where my parents were, but he was determined to do what was best by me. He dressed me in boy’s clothes and the few times we went into town, he told everyone I was his son.” She shrugged. “I ran into the man who became my husband when I was out hunting one day, and I injured my shoulder. He had to take my shirt off to bandage it, despite my pleas for him not to.”

“And he told everyone you were a woman?”

She shook her head, wishing he’d hurry and sit down so they

could eat. “Not at all. Instead, he brought me flowers and courted me. We ended up marrying just a month later, and then everyone knew I was a woman who had been running around in pants my entire life.” She shrugged. “They all assume I had loose morals for dressing as a boy, even though no one knew what to do.”

“And where is the mountain man who raised you now?” he asked.

Charlotte frowned. “He died shortly after I married.”

“Was he good to you?” Earl asked.

“As good as a man who hasn’t been around a female for a good long while. He treated me well, and he taught me everything I needed to know about hard work. He even taught me to read. Of course, he wasn’t very experienced with reading himself, so after the basics, I taught myself. I can shoot and trap better than any man you know.”

He chuckled. “And now you’re running a ranch on your own. Will men work for us after we marry? Or will that problem still be there?”

“No, it’ll be fine. The men will report to you and consider you their boss, just as they did with my Howard.”

He sat down at the small table and took her hand and the boys. “Let’s pray.”

Charlotte didn’t know why she hadn’t expected him to pray, but she was a little startled when he took her hand the way he did. She obediently bowed her head, and out of the corner of her eye, she saw that Walt did as well.

After the prayer, she smiled at her son. “This is Walt. Walt, I’m

going to marry Earl, and he'll be your new papa."

Walt nodded, too busy with his food to care much.

While they ate, he asked her questions. "How many cattle do you run?"

"A thousand head. When Howard was alive, we had ten men working for us full-time. I can't do the work of that many men. I need help, and a lot of it."

"Well, you have me, so now there are two of us. I can start hiring men tomorrow. Do you know if any of the men who worked for the ranch before are still in the area and looking for work?"

"No idea. They all left en masse as soon as Howard was killed."

"May I ask what happened to him?"

She sighed. "He was out on the ice during a late freeze last spring, just wanting to break the ice so the cows could drink. He slipped through, and though his men pulled him out as quickly as they could, he died of pneumonia a few days later."

"I'm sorry."

She nodded. "Thank you. Walt and I have made it, but we really should be branding the cows, and it's almost impossible for one woman to do alone. That's a lie. It is impossible. Last year, Howard led the branding, and died two weeks later."

"And you've managed alone for a year?" The shock in Earl's voice made her smile.

"I'm a hard worker." Charlotte said the words loudly and clearly. She was proud of having done almost everything the ranch needed for about a year.

“I can see that. All right. As soon as we’re done eating, we’re going to town and getting married. Tomorrow I’ll head into town and see if I can scrounge up any men to come work for us.”

“Tomorrow is Sunday,” she reminded him. “I’ll introduce you to some of the kinder ranchers in the area at church, and perhaps they’ll be able to tell you where to start searching for men.”

“Sounds good to me.” He wiped off his mouth and stood. “You finished yet?”

She stared at the big pot of food and nodded. “But let’s get the food into the ice box. We’re going to want to eat it for our noon meal tomorrow. And possibly for supper.” She rubbed the back of her neck. “I’ve gotten into the habit of returning immediately after church and changing into my britches again. It’s so much easier to work in pants.”

He grinned. “I can see that. You go change, and I’ll chat with Walt.”

Charlotte looked at her son. “Do you mind staying with Earl?”

The boy shook his head.

Charlotte hurried away and put on one of her day dresses. They were in perfect condition because she hadn’t worn them in a full year. She liked the idea of being able to wear dresses again.

While she was in her room, she brushed her hair from her face and put it back into a simple knot. She’d taken to just tying it back with a ribbon and going on with her day. On a more difficult day, she’d just shove it all up under her hat and fight with the tendrils that framed her face all day.

Stepping back into the kitchen, she saw that Earl had put on a

shirt, and was sitting at the table talking to Walt, who was smiling slightly. She hadn't seen Walt react so well to a stranger since...well, it had never happened.

"I'm ready," she said softly, loathe to interrupt them. But it was already seven on a Friday night, and she knew the pastor went to bed early.

"Walt and I will hitch up the wagon."

"I can help," she said. "It's not like I've never done it in a dress."

"You won't today. You just sit and rest a bit. Right, Walt?"

The boy nodded emphatically, following Earl out the door. As she watched them leave, Charlotte knew that even if Earl wasn't the right man for her to marry, he was the right new papa for Walt. The boy was already doing as he said and seeming happy to be around him. It was more than she could have asked for.

She sat on the sofa in the parlor, watching out the window as they hitched up the wagon. Earl had a way with her boy that really surprised her. Walt was doing everything he was told and running to get whatever Earl needed. It was a joy for her to watch.

When they were ready, she went out and Earl politely handed her up into the wagon. She hadn't used the buggy since Howard's death, but she was happy using the wagon. The buggy seemed like too much, and even the thought of hitching it herself was overwhelming. The farm wagon was just what was needed for any trips to town.

Charlotte directed Earl in which way to go the entire way, but really, it was only a few turns. "The parsonage is right next to the church," she told him as soon as the church's steeple came into view.

At the parsonage, he helped her down, and then lifted Walt, making the little boy giggle when he tossed him in the air and caught him so easily. The three walked up to the house together, and Charlotte knocked.

The pastor himself came to the door, and Charlotte smiled as his welcoming grin became less pronounced. He'd never approved of her. Not one little bit. "What is it you need?" he asked, obviously looking down on Charlotte.

"I'm here to get married," Charlotte said, becoming no-nonsense even as the pastor did. Why couldn't people believe she wasn't the evil they'd come to think of her as.

The pastor's gaze landed on Earl. "And who are you?" Charlotte noted that the pastor didn't open the door wider to let them inside.

Earl put his hand on Charlotte's shoulder and another on little Walt's head. "My name is Earl Miller, and I'm here to marry Charlotte. I'm sorry for the lateness of the hour, but we both just finished doing our work for the day, and we'd like to be married immediately."

The pastor hesitated, but then he opened the door wide. "Come in. I'll get my wife to witness it."

Charlotte wanted to kick the man, but she didn't bother. She was a member of his congregation after all, and her reputation didn't need to have violence added onto it.

The ceremony was performed quickly with no frills. When the pastor pronounced Earl could kiss his bride, Charlotte froze. She hadn't been thinking about that part of the ceremony. Earl turned to her with a slight smile, and to her surprise, he seemed reluctant to kiss

her as well.

He brushed his lips right beside her mouth, touching her in no other way. No one watching would realize it hadn't been a real kiss, but Charlotte did. It was odd that he wouldn't kiss her when given the opportunity, and she was sure she'd ask him about it as soon as Walt was in bed—if not before.

They thanked the pastor and headed out to the wagon when a thought occurred to Charlotte. "Were you married before?" she asked.

Earl shook his head. "No, I was supposed to marry two years ago, but my fiancée died."

"I'm so sorry. What happened?"

He took a deep breath, as if talking about it was extremely difficult. "She was a victim of a kidnapping and sold by some bad men in our town. When she returned, we began courting, but her reputation was ruined. Everyone knew she'd been sold for her sexual favors."

"Oh, that's terrible!"

"Yes, it was. No one thought anything of her because she'd been sullied, but I saw through it all to the beautiful girl she'd been when we were growing up." He handed her into the wagon and then lifted Walt up as well, again making the boy giggle. "She went away a month before the wedding with her mother and two sisters to refresh herself. She drowned in the ocean. I'm still not sure if it was an accident." He lost his voice at the end of the story, and she could tell he was still very hurt by his fiancée's death.

"I'm so sorry. People can be cruel. If not for my Walt, I'm not

sure what would have happened to me when Howard died. Other widows have people lined up at their homes, bringing them meals and fresh baked goods. Instead of that, all the men who had worked for my husband quit on the spot, and I became a pariah all over again.”

Earl picked up the leads and looked over at her. “When I read your letter, it reminded me so much of the love I’d lost, I knew you were meant for me.”

“And you don’t mind my reputation?”

He shook his head. “I didn’t mind her reputation which was all true. Why would I mind yours which sounds ridiculous?”

The rest of the journey was in silence as she thought about what he’d said. He wasn’t going to look down on her. He was there to help. Never had Charlotte thought there would be another man who could be as kind and generous as her Howard. She knew now she was wrong.

Chapter Three

Together, they put Walt to bed, and he stared at Earl for a while, finally putting his hand on Earl's face, as if memorizing it. "I'm going to be here when you wake up, Walt. I promise."

Walt nodded very seriously and settled into bed.

As they left the room, Charlotte whispered, "He's already getting attached to you. You'd better not be planning on going anywhere."

"I wouldn't have married you if I was planning to leave, now, would I?"

"I don't know. I really don't know what kind of man you are." She walked toward the parlor, knowing they needed to talk without prying eyes and ears for a moment or two. She could tell he was exhausted, and she was as well, but things needed to be said.

In the parlor, she sat down and waited for him to do the same. "I thought it would be good if we had a moment to talk before sleeping tonight."

He nodded. "I don't plan on trying to have relations with you if that's what you're thinking."

"I understand that, and I appreciate it. I wanted to talk mostly about sleeping arrangements. There are two rooms downstairs, one for Walt, and one for me. There are also two rooms upstairs. I wondered if you would be willing to take one of those beds for at least the first few weeks as we get to know one another."

He nodded. "I'm actually relieved you're offering. I liked your letter so much because that part of marriage wasn't part of the

arrangement. I still think about my Patsy often.”

Charlotte nodded, glad her suspicions had been confirmed. “Good. The beds upstairs aren’t made up, but there’s a dust sheet over them. Do you mind making up your own bed? There are sheets in the dresser of each room up there. I’ve been up since before dawn, and I’m pretty well done with work for the day.”

“I don’t mind at all. I know the kind of back-breaking work you’ve been trying to do alone, and I can only be impressed by you. I will happily make my own bed. Do you have cows that need to be milked tonight?”

Her eyes widened. “With you coming here, I totally forgot! Sally must be bleating with pain by now. I wondered why she was mooing so loudly!”

“In the barn?” he asked. There was a small barn and a stable as well. He’d been in the stable, but not the barn as of yet.

She nodded. “I’ll do it though. I can’t ask you to make your own bed *and* milk my cow. Not at this late hour.”

“You’re not asking. I’m offering. Now go to sleep. I’ll take care of it, and from now on, I will always milk the cow. And hopefully by noon tomorrow, we’ll have a full work crew, and you can be a housewife again.”

She smiled at his words. “I’ve never heard anything that sounded so wonderful.” Getting to her feet, she walked to the parlor door. “Thank you for understanding exactly what I need.”

“That’s a husband’s job.” As Earl went about milking the cow, he thought about the woman he’d married. She was so tiny and frail it

was hard to believe anyone had ever seen her as a boy. Of course, she knew how to work hard. There was no doubt about that. He could see the exhaustion in her face from the moment she walked in the door, and she had been utterly pleased to be served supper.

Charlotte was a good woman. There was no doubt about that in his mind. And Walt seemed to be a sweet boy. Hopefully they'd get him talking before too terribly long. He did seem to be able to get his needs across without speaking though.

He put the milk into the ice box and climbed the stairs, finding the sheets and quilt to make the bed. This marriage was so different than the one he'd have had with Patsy, but he felt blessed to be in a place where he could make a difference, where he could work with animals and the land. Montana was the place he'd been searching for his entire life without realizing it.

If only it was Patsy he'd married instead of Charlotte.

Climbing into bed he said a prayer of thanks for the situation he found himself in, making a special request that it would be easy to find men to work with him and Walt would learn to speak quickly. The boy needed a father figure. There was no doubt about that.

He fell asleep quickly, having slept very little on the train. Now, though, he had a place to call his own. Whether he was in bed with his new wife or on an entirely different floor than she was, it was all fine. He was safe and he was warm and fed. Who could ask for anything more out of life?

It was already light out when Charlotte woke the next morning,

and she let out a groan. Another hard day. And then she remembered. Earl was there. She was married again, and life was going to be easier from here on out.

She quickly dressed in her britches and work shirt before walking into the kitchen to start breakfast. To her surprise, Earl had beaten her there, and perfect pancakes were cooking on the stove. “Who taught you to cook?” she asked.

“My sister Elizabeth. She thought that all men should be able to cook, so when she moved out on her own, she invited each of her brothers to spend one month with her, with the understanding we’d be learning how to cook during that month. I think I was the only brother to take her up on it. Ma taught all my sisters to cook, but she didn’t think boys should cook. I figured I needed to learn everything I could so I would be of benefit to someone somewhere.” He motioned toward the table. “Sit. I’ve milked the cows and gathered the eggs.”

“You know, I’m going to have to do *some* of the work here. It can’t be all you.”

He laughed. “For the first couple of days it should be all me. You’ve been doing too much for too long.”

“Are you sure you didn’t ride in on a white horse?”

“Positive. I’m not taking you away from your problems. I’m just helping you deal with them.” He carried the pancakes and bacon to the table. “I found a coffee pot and made some coffee. I wasn’t sure if you drank it.”

“How else would I have kept going for the past year?” she asked. “I’ve got more coffee in me than blood at this point in my life.”

“Should I wake Walt?” he asked.

She shook her head. “He needs lots of sleep. I usually wrap his breakfast in a napkin and take it with me as I go to work. He eats it as soon as he’s awake enough to care that he’s hungry.”

“Well, I don’t plan for the two of you to be working on the ranch today,” he said. “I’ll go to town, hire the men we need, and then I’ll meet you back here. I’ll lead the men and you can be a housewife again.”

“But you don’t know what needs to be done...” she said.

“You’ll tell me. I have a feeling any men I find here are going to know how to do whatever we need.”

Charlotte considered for a minute. It sounded so tempting to just stay in and cook and clean for a change. “I’m not sure if that could work.”

“Then you sit down and make a list today. When I get the men here, we’ll start conquering that list. I don’t think the men should see you in your britches with the way they treat you.”

She pursed her lips, thinking about it. “Does it bother you that I don’t always wear a dress?”

“Why would it? No, I have no problem with you wearing what’s appropriate for the work you’re doing. I just know that it’ll be harder for you if you are seen wearing them any time soon.” Earl needed her to understand that he accepted her for exactly who she was, but he would protect her if there was any way to do it. “I’m just not going to be able to protect you from every lewd look you get if you go out in pants. It won’t work.”

Understanding his meaning, Charlotte nodded. "All right then. I'll wear a skirt. And Walt and I will begin working inside instead of out on the range every day. If I need to show you how to do something, I'll show you on Sundays or at night when no one else is around." Her eyes met his. "Thank you for giving me my life back."

He nodded. "I'm happy to do it. Just try and work with me, and not against me."

"I'll do my best."

After breakfast, she washed the dishes while he headed to town to try to hire men. She kept thinking about all the work that needed to be done, but she couldn't let herself fret over it. She could already tell her new husband was an extremely hard-working man who would do what needed to be done around the ranch.

When Walt came out of his room, he ran from room to room, obviously looking for something. She understood after a moment and crouched down in front of him. "Earl is still here. He went to find some men to do all the work you and mama have been doing."

Walt seemed upset still, but he nodded understanding, going to the table to have his breakfast. As he plowed through the pancakes, Charlotte did her best to explain to him how everything would work. "Earl is my new husband and your new papa. He will live with us for always, but he must do the same kind of work your papa did. He'll have to hire the men and work with them all day long. He won't get to spend all day in the house with us. But Mama will be able to wear dresses again, and I can stay home and clean the house instead of working outside all day. And you get to stay home with me. Does that

sound good?”

Walt nodded. He looked happier after her explanation.

Two hours later when Earl returned, he went into the house for lunch. “The men are all starting at one, which means I have an hour to eat.” He spotted Walt sitting at the table, looking a bit shy. “There’s my boy! I missed you at breakfast, you little lazy bones.”

Walt’s face lit up at Earl’s words. He held his hands in the air for Earl to pick him up, which Earl did without hesitation, dipping him upside down.

Charlotte watched the two of them for a minute while she continued her lunch preparations. “I desperately need to make a trip to the general store in Cauldron Valley, but it’ll wait for a day or two. We need supplies badly.”

“Have you had time to put in a kitchen garden?” Earl asked.

“No. I haven’t done a thing in that regard. There was an area Howard plowed for me last spring, but it’s overgrown now.”

“It should be able to wait until Sunday for me to plow it. And if you don’t mind, I really enjoy gardening. I’d love to put in the kitchen garden.”

She gaped at him for a moment. “Do you remember me saying that I’m going to need to do some of the work?”

Earl shrugged. “I helped my mother with hers a lot, and I was always working in the fields with my father. Farming is in my blood.”

“I understand. Let me milk the cows and gather eggs then. You shouldn’t have to do all of it.”

He frowned. “But it’s my job to milk the cows. We’ll

compromise, and you can gather eggs.”

She chuckled. The easier of the two jobs would be left for her. “I don’t mind milking.”

“I grew up being told it was the man’s job to milk the cows. Most of my sisters don’t even know how.”

“But you cook!”

He shrugged. “I’m a rebel.”

Charlotte could tell when she’d been defeated. She hated milking cows anyway. “How many men were you able to hire?” she asked.

“I hired twenty-five to get us through until we’re all caught up. I told them all they’d be judged and the ones who did their job best and treated my wife the best would get to stay on permanently.”

She laughed. “You’re bribing them to treat me well!”

“Something has to work. I told every one of them that if they disrespected you, they’d not only lose their job, I’d knock them into next week.”

Without thinking, Charlotte left the pot she was stirring and walked over to him, kissing him square on the mouth. “Thank you!”

“You’re very welcome. I don’t like the idea of anyone treating you with anything but the utmost respect. You had a harder childhood than most, and you don’t need to be treated poorly because of it.”

Blushing, she hurried back to the stove and continued stirring the cream sauce into the potatoes she’d made. She’d chopped up chunks of bacon, fried it, and added it as well. It was a quick, easy lunch that would leave him full throughout the day.

And she would be able to catch up on the laundry. It had been a couple of weeks since she'd taken the time to pull out her scrub board. "I'll be doing laundry this afternoon," she told him, relieved to finally have the opportunity to do so. "Make sure you leave any dirty clothes out for me. I'd love to get the laundry all caught up."

"Will do." Earl was pleased to see she was willing to go back to being a fulltime wife, and not insist on continuing to work so hard on the ranch. He accepted a bowl from her and waited as she and Walt got their food. Then he prayed over the meal, asking God to watch out for them on this first day.

He took a bite and sighed. "Just as good as my ma makes."

She smiled at the compliment. "It's my favorite thing to fix for a quick lunch."

"I could eat it every day." Minutes later when he left the house to go out and deal with the men he'd hired, he had the list she'd made in his hand. The men were going to work the ranch and respect her at the same time. Or they wouldn't be working for him.

Chapter Four

Charlotte felt odd staying in the house and doing women's work after so much time working the ranch alone. A couple of times she considered riding out to where the men were and checking on them, but she knew better. She had to let Earl establish authority over them, and for him to do that, she needed to remain unseen. At least for the first little while.

She and Walt spent the afternoon doing the laundry, and she made her son's favorite meal for supper—chicken and dumplings. It had been a favorite of his since he was tiny, and she knew he hadn't had it since before Howard had died. She'd had no time to cook something that took as much time as chicken and dumplings did.

As she cooked, she talked to Walt about each step she was taking to make the meal. "We have to make the dumplings small, so they'll puff up just perfectly, and make the broth taste delicious. This is my favorite way to eat chicken, and I know it's always been yours too. Do you remember eating chicken and dumplings?" Charlotte so used to talking only to Walt that she barely remembered how to have a conversation sometimes. She just always talked and talked and talked, knowing there would be no response.

Walt kept looking toward the door, and finally Charlotte understood. "Are you waiting for your new papa?"

He nodded.

"He should be home in about an hour. So, when it's time to eat, he'll come in the door, all tired and sweaty." Why she liked the idea of

sweat on Earl she didn't know. She could picture him shirtless as he was in her kitchen the night before with sweat dripping from his face. Her face heated up at the very idea of it. She certainly didn't like sweaty men, but a sweaty Earl was something to be desired apparently.

After dropping the dumplings into the boiling broth, Charlotte folded the laundry she'd brought in earlier. She knew it should be ironed, but she typically only ironed her church clothes. If Earl was fussier about his clothes than that—and she had a strong feeling he wouldn't be—then she would put more effort into it. For now, just getting her house back under control felt like a monumental task.

Walt put his own clothes away as she'd taught him, and then he carried Earl's clothes up and put them on his bed. When he came back down, he had a look of pride that warmed Charlotte's heart. She loved that Walt was already so taken with Earl. It boded well for their future.

Charlotte checked one of the dumplings for doneness as she heard the door opening. Walt ran into the dining room and threw himself at Earl, who gathered him in his arms in a huge welcoming hug.

Removing his hat, he carried the boy into the kitchen. "That smells absolutely delicious. I cannot wait to eat."

"How'd it go today?" she asked. He definitely looked worse for the wear. He was dirty, and she saw blood on his hand. "How did you injure yourself?"

He shrugged, walking to the sink, and washing his hands for

supper after setting Walt on the floor. “I think it went pretty well. If nothing else, the men respect me now.”

“What happened?” She turned toward him, her eyes narrowed.

“One of the men, Johnny something or other, said you’d always been a loose woman, and he was surprised you’d been able to dupe any man into marrying you. He didn’t say it to me, of course, but I heard it anyway.”

“And?”

“I kept my word. I fired him on the spot and knocked him to the ground. Repeatedly. No one is going to get away with talking about my wife that way.”

“You’re going to end up with no men working for you if you keep that up!” She was flattered he’d defended her, but they had to have men working for them to keep the ranch going.

“On the contrary, several of the men told me that Johnny had trouble keeping his tongue in check, and it would be all over town within hours that I won’t allow men to denigrate you.”

“I hope you’re right.” Charlotte dished up three bowls of the chicken and dumplings and placed them on the table. “I hope you enjoy chicken and dumplings. It’s been Walt’s favorite meal since he was big enough to eat real food, and I haven’t made them since Howard died. I don’t think he even remembers the meal, but I hope he’ll love it just as much as he always has.”

“Chicken and dumplings is one of the things I love but can’t make for myself. Now I have to stay married to you, so I’ll be able to have chicken and dumplings on a regular basis.”

She laughed softly. "I suppose you will."

After the prayer, Charlotte and Earl watched as Walt ate a bite of his chicken and dumplings. His eyes widened and his mouth stretched into a smile as he began quickly shoveling the food into his mouth.

She smiled. "Slow down, Walt. You're going to choke."

Walt nodded, but she could tell it took him real effort to not eat so quickly.

Earl grinned at her. "You were right. He still loves it." He took a bite himself. "What's not to love? This is better than my ma's, and that's saying something." He shook his head. "Where did you learn to cook?"

"The man who raised me taught me. He had a cookbook, and after he taught me the basics, he handed me the cookbook and told me to make something that tasted good."

"Did he love you?"

"Old Jake? Yeah, as much as he could love, he loved me. He lost his wife and daughters back east and came west to forget about his troubles. And ended up finding a baby within a couple years of arriving here. He didn't know who had left me or why, but he knew he was going to take care of me."

"He was good to you?"

She shrugged. "As good as he could be. He definitely wasn't a father to me, but he was a decent uncle sort. I wasn't speaking when he found me, and he's the only real role model I ever had. When I married Howard, his mother lived with us for a year, teaching me how

to be a lady. But she loathed me. She told me all the time that Howard should have married a real lady from back east, and she couldn't believe he'd saddled himself with someone like me. Only when we were alone, though. She never would have said it in front of Howard."

"That's terrible." He covered her hand with his. "I bet she was even worse after he died."

"She never responded to my letter informing her of his death. So, she wasn't worse, she was just not there." She took a deep breath. "From the instant Howard died, it was just Walt and me. But we did good, didn't we, Walt?"

Walt's little cheeks were bulged out with the amount of food he had in his mouth, but he nodded. He tried to smile, but his mouth was too full to do it.

She shook her head. "Walt, you're going to choke. That won't be any fun, will it?"

Walt shook his head, but he didn't slow down in his eating at all.

Earl laughed. "You look like a chipmunk, Walt!" He felt funny speaking to someone who didn't speak at all but after observing Charlotte with the boy, he was able to do it.

"What did you and the men accomplish today? Other than learning who's boss?"

He leaned back and rubbed the back of his neck in embarrassment. "We started herding the calves toward the pasture up near the barn. You said that's where we'd brand them."

"Yes, it is. Perfect. How many were you able to move?"

“Around a hundred head. It was pretty hard to tell with all of them running around bleating like maniacs.”

She chuckled. “Dairy farmers don’t do all this?”

“Not the same way.” He sighed, pushing his bowl away. “Today is what? Saturday?”

She nodded. “Tomorrow morning is church.”

“I can’t believe you go to the church the pastor who married us runs. He’s not a nice man.”

“He is. He just believes the rumors about me. Everyone does.”

“So, you have no friends at all?”

“Actually, I have two friends, but they’re both quite busy having babies.” Earl noticed a longing look on her face as she said it.

“You never got pregnant again after Walt?”

Charlotte shook her head. “Never. I wanted a daughter so badly, but it just never happened.”

“I come from a family of fourteen or fifteen. I don’t know. I quit counting a while back. Thankfully my parents seem to have stopped having new kids. I’m sure we’ll have some if that’s what you want.”

“Well, not yet, but I do want more children.”

Earl smiled. “I’m not ready yet either. I know you’re dealing with grief, but I am too. I really loved Patsy. She was everything to me, and when she died, I wanted to die with her.”

“I understand,” she said, her hand reaching out to cover his. “Is shared grief a good foundation for a marriage?”

“I have no idea. But I’m willing to make the most of it if you are.”

“Absolutely. I appreciate you defending me today. Howard tried, but he just wasn’t big enough to knock men down. I thank you for caring enough to do so.”

Earl nodded. “Hopefully it won’t be necessary again, but I’ll do it as many times as it is necessary. That’s one of the good things about being a bad kid. You learn how to fight early. I mostly just fought with my brothers, but it’s the same thing. You fight and fight, and just deal with it.”

Walt interrupted by pushing his empty bowl toward Charlotte. “Are you finished?” she asked.

Walt shook his head so hard his hair flew up on the sides. “I need to give you a haircut!” she said, as she got up to refill his bowl. “Eat slower this time.”

The boy nodded, but he went after the food like he was starving. Again.

“I want to plow a space for our kitchen garden tomorrow. You let me know what you want me to plant, and I’ll do it.”

“I really don’t want you to have to do all that work...”

“Oh, I won’t do it all. Walt will help me with the planting, won’t you, Walt?”

Walt nodded, looking as if he was thrilled to be asked.

“I can help too if you need me to.” Charlotte detested gardening, and she really hoped he’d tell her not to worry about it.

“You can be in charge of bringing your menfolk cold drinks when we need them. If we work hard, then we’ll need refreshments, isn’t that right, Walt?”

Walt nodded, giggling a little. Sounds did come out of his mouth, which made Earl wonder why he didn't talk. He wouldn't speak about it in front of Walt, though. Perhaps Charlotte knew why he wasn't speaking at all.

After supper, Earl and Walt went outside to milk the cow, and Walt seemed very excited to be with his new papa. Every step he seemed to want to help more and more.

When it came time to milk, Earl showed Walt how to pull down on the teats and get milk from the cow. As soon as he'd gotten a little milk, Walt looked at Earl with wide eyes as if he'd never done anything so exciting in all his life.

When the pail was full, Walt tried to lift it, but couldn't. He kept trying until a large hand came down and held the handle with him, and they carried it into the house together. When they had set it on the table, Charlotte turned around and praised them accordingly. "I'm sure glad I have such strong men who can milk the cow for me. It's hard work!"

Walt nodded and looked with pride at Earl. "Walt did most of the work himself. He's good at milking cows!"

Charlotte smiled. "He's always been such a good helper. I'm glad he's milking cows now."

After they'd put him to bed—together—Earl and Charlotte went into the parlor, but Earl was already yawning. "Ranching isn't harder work than farming, but it's different enough that I'm having to think more and use different muscles."

"I can see that. You can go on to bed right away if you want to."

Earl shook his head. "I want to ask about Walt's speaking. He giggles, so he's not mute. He just doesn't say anything. Has he ever said anything?"

She nodded, looking sad. "He's never been what I would call talkative, but he was saying a few words before Howard died. Since he passed, he hasn't spoken at all. I hate it, but there's not much I can do. I was really worried about it when Howard was alive, but things like that just couldn't take precedence when I had so much else to do. I try to work with him while we're out on the range, but he doesn't seem to want to talk anymore."

"Do you mind if I try to work with him on it as well?" Earl asked. He wanted to be able to help the boy. He already loved him and felt responsible for him.

"I don't mind at all. If you can get him to talk, I'll be thrilled. It's been so long since I've heard his voice," Charlotte said, a lone tear sliding down her cheek.

Earl moved to sit beside her on the sofa, his arm going around her shoulders. "You've had to bear so much on your own. Someone should have been there helping you."

"Like who? No one thinks anything of me."

"I do," he said softly. "I'll be by your side, carrying as much of your load as I can for the rest of our lives. I promise you that."

She turned to him, her head resting on his shoulder. "I think you actually mean that, don't you? I don't know why you're taking on Walt as if he's your own."

"Because he is mine now. He was the moment I married you.

Even before. The instant he giggled when I tossed him in the air, he was mine as well.”

She sighed. “Thank you for taking us on.”

“Thank you for giving me a place to call my own. You’ve given my life a purpose it never would have had back in Massachusetts.” He looked at her. “I think this marriage is in both of our best interests. Not just yours.”

She smiled at that and nodded. “I think you may be right.”

Chapter Five

Charlotte woke up before the sun the following morning and was surprised to already hear Earl humming in the kitchen. The man was definitely more of a morning person than she was.

She stumbled into the kitchen to see him leaned against the counter, drinking a cup of coffee. “Good morning,” he said.

“Morning.” She knew better than to say too much before the first cup of coffee was in her system. She tended to be very grumpy in the mornings.

“Do you want me to cook breakfast?” he asked. “I’ve milked the cow and gathered the eggs already.”

“That would be wonderful,” she said. “If you don’t mind. I don’t do well in the mornings. Not until I’ve had my first three pots of coffee anyway.”

He chuckled. “I don’t mind at all. I saw some potatoes in the cellar, and I thought maybe some fried eggs with fried potatoes. I haven’t had fried potatoes in ages.”

“That sounds good to me. And bacon. I do love bacon.”

“It should be against the law to not love bacon. I cannot imagine how I would be if my religion forbade me from eating bacon. I know I would be terribly sad.”

She laughed softly, taking a sip of her coffee. “You make your coffee nice and strong. I approve.”

“I approve of a lot of things about you,” he said. Her hair was still back in a braid to keep it from tangling during the night, but

there were some tendrils falling, framing her face. "I really like your hair first thing in the morning." He tucked a strand behind her ear and kissed her cheek.

"What was that for?" she asked.

"For looking beautiful. I need no other reason." Earl stopped and looked at her for a moment. "Unless you'd rather I not touch you."

She shook her head. "No, small touches will get us used to each other quicker."

"And that's good?" he asked.

Charlotte nodded. "We didn't have a normal courtship. We never touched until the preacher said, 'I do,' and that's not normal. I feel like I should want to touch you and kiss you, but I just don't yet. Does that make sense?"

He nodded. "I'm glad you feel that way because it's odd for me as well. It would have felt right with Patsy, but I married a stranger."

"As did I."

They stood for a moment in silence. Finally, he asked, "What time is church?"

"Ten. I try to leave here by nine-thirty or so."

"That doesn't give you time to talk to people before the service," he said.

"Most people go out of their way to avoid talking to me," she said. "I prefer to not get there early enough to be snubbed more than five times."

"We'll leave at nine-fifteen," he said. "I want to meet some of these people." He was already more than a little disgusted by the

people in her town. For a place called Mountain Home, it was not very welcoming.

He cooked breakfast while she quickly pressed the clothes they would wear. When breakfast was ready, she woke Walt. "Papa cooked breakfast, and it smells so good!"

Walt rubbed his eyes.

"Come on. We have church today."

When Walt's face fell, she hugged him. "Papa's going with us."

Walt seemed happy again. It was strange how quickly the boy was bonding with her new husband.

She took his hand and pulled him toward the kitchen where he sat at the table and looked at Earl. When Earl said, "Good morning, Walt!" Walt waved.

Earl set the food on the table, and they prayed before digging in. "I love fried potatoes in the mornings. The colder it is, the more I love them. It's strange here because even though it's warm during the day, it's really cold at night," he said.

"It's the elevation. I've had people tell me that a lot when they first moved here."

"People talk to you a lot?"

"Only when they have just arrived. It takes them a little while to realize they're supposed to shun me for wearing pants when I was a girl." She shook her head. "I have a couple of friends who haven't quite gotten to that point yet, and I have to say, I'm thrilled!"

"I can understand that," he said. "I don't know how I'd react if no one would speak to me. I'm still considered wild and poorly

behaved back in Beckham, but no one ever stopped *speaking* to me.”

“It’s not easy to be the only person in town no one will speak to,” she said. “It was better while I was married to Howard because this ranch is one of the largest in the area. Not as big as the Royal River Ranch of course, but close. People were intimidated by him.”

“And they knew if they treated you poorly, he would no longer do business with them. They’ll learn the same about me very quickly.”

“I have to go to the general store in Cauldron Valley tomorrow,” she said. “The merchant is nice enough but the people in the store aren’t. It’s hard to go alone.”

He frowned. “I suppose they’re closed on Sundays.”

“They are.”

“I’ll get the men started in the morning tomorrow and take a long lunch then. I don’t want anyone mistreating you.”

She shook her head. “No, I was just complaining, and I shouldn’t have been. I’ll handle it on my own.”

“Are you sure? I don’t mind.”

“I think it’s better if you’re there watching over the men until they’re used to you. Howard always said that if he was sick for a day, only half the work got done.”

Earl nodded. “I was thinking of that, but I don’t want you to have to go alone if people will be rude to you.”

“People are always rude to me, but it’s okay. I’m used to it.”

“It’s a good thing it doesn’t upset you!”

Charlotte laughed. “It did at first, but I came to terms with it.”

He hitched up the buggy that hadn’t been out of the stable in

over a year for church that morning, Walt at his side, helping. Well, he wasn't really helping, but Earl made sure he thought he was. The boy was already precious to him.

As they left for church, Charlotte took a deep breath. "Just promise me you won't start seeing me the way all the townspeople do."

Earl frowned at her. "You don't think very much of me, do you?"

"That's not it at all," she protested, worried she was causing problems between them. "I've just made a great deal of friends who stopped talking to me once they realized how everyone else felt about me."

"I'm not going to do that to you. Ever."

"I hope not." She hugged Walt closer to her side, fully aware that people's feelings for her were extended to her son. No one wanted their children playing with him, and it wasn't just because he couldn't speak.

Once they arrived at the church, Earl helped her down and then lifted Walt onto the ground. Together the three of them approached the church building which was already filled with people.

Ada Kelso waved to her, and she took Earl's arm, leading him to her friend. "This is Ada Kelso. Her husband Wade is around here somewhere. She's my friend."

"It's good to meet you," he said, looking at Mrs. Kelso for a moment. Then his eyes widened. "Wait...You're Ada Applebottom!" He knew her from Beckham.

Ada smiled. "I am! Aren't you one of the demon horde?"

He cringed a little. "I was when I was younger. Now I'm an upstanding rancher who is married to your friend here."

"Which one are you?" Ada asked.

"I'm Earl. I'm the fourth son."

"Elizabeth saved my sanity by sending me out here to marry my Wade," she said, smiling at him. The baby in her arms wiggled a little, and she turned her to her shoulder and patted her back. "Here's Wade now. Wade, this is Earl Miller. I knew him back in Beckham. You've heard me talk about Elizabeth? He's her younger brother!"

"Oh, I'm glad you're getting to see someone else from home." Wade held out his hand for Earl to shake. "Good to meet you."

"And you! I'm glad Charlotte has a friend here, and it's fun finding out she's from Beckham just as I am."

Wade nodded. "How long have you been here? Did your sister set you up to be Charlotte's husband?" When Earl hesitated, Wade shook his head. "None of my business. Don't ever be afraid to tell me that."

"Thanks for understanding."

"Oh, no problem. I guess you met my little girl?" Wade looked down at the baby Ada was holding with love in his eyes. "That's our little Sarah. Isn't she beautiful?"

Earl smiled. "Absolutely the most beautiful thing I've ever seen." Truly the baby looked like all the other babies he'd seen, but he didn't tell Wade that. "You should come for supper some night. I'm sure Charlotte would be thrilled to have another woman's company."

Charlotte looked at Ada. "You don't have to. You don't want people to start thinking of you the way they think of me."

Ada groaned. "I don't care what anyone else thinks of you. I form my own opinions. We'd love to come for supper. You just let us know when."

"Maybe Saturday night?" Earl suggested. "No one has to be up before dawn for work the next day."

Ada's eyes widened. "Did you hire some men then?"

Charlotte smiled. "Earl hired several men yesterday. He's already fired one too."

Earl could see Johnny with a circle of men around him across the church. When Johnny caught him looking at him, he shrunk himself down. Earl was pleased to see the man had two black eyes and bruising around his nose. He hoped he'd broken it.

Ada sighed. "And I don't even have to guess why. What is wrong with the people in this town? I can tell you if something happened to my Wade, I'd be the first to put on britches and start working on the range. I'd probably be terrible at it, but I'd do it without complaint."

"Why do I have an image of you in fancy dresses?" Earl asked. "I could swear everywhere you went in Beckham you were dressed formally."

"I was." Ada shook her head. "My mother was certain I needed to marry a rich man and take my place in society. I just wanted to be a farm wife, but I settled for being a ranch wife. I will eternally be thankful to your sister for getting me out of that miserable situation."

"Elizabeth is an amazing sister."

“Is she the one who taught you to cook?” Charlotte asked.

“Yup,” Earl said easily.

“I will be eternally grateful to her as well then.”

Earl laughed. “I’ve only cooked a couple of meals for you.”

“It was three. And it was three meals I didn’t have to cook. I don’t think I’ve eaten anything I didn’t have to cook for fifteen years!”

“Well, I’m happy to oblige,” he said, grinning at her.

“Maybe you should come to my house then,” Ada said. “I’ll cook for you! I wish I’d known. I’d have had you over months ago!”

“I was too busy to visit anyone. You have a new baby, so you should come to my place. I love the idea of doing something nice for you for a change.”

Cassandra Royal came over then. “Did you really find a man to marry?” she asked. Looking at Earl, she smiled. “Earl? I know you’re one of the Miller boys.”

“You got it. I’m Earl.” Earl knew Cassandra from their school. Cassandra had been much better behaved than he and his siblings.

“I don’t know if you remember me. I was Cassandra Arnold, but I’ve married, and I’m Cassandra Royal now.”

Earl nodded, smiling. “I remember you well. My brother, Joe, had a huge crush on you.”

“Joe dipped my pigtails in an inkwell, followed me home throwing apples at me, and tripped me in the schoolyard.”

“I know. He was flirting.”

Cassandra looked at someone over Earl’s shoulder. “I’m glad my husband wasn’t that bad at flirting. Though, if I remember correctly,

he wasn't exactly good at courting me. Earl, meet my husband Cameron Royal."

Earl turned, smiling. "Nice to meet you."

"And you." Cameron looked at Cassandra. "Now tell me how you know this man."

Cassandra laughed. "We went to school together, and his brother picked on me mercilessly, and now I hear it was because he'd had a crush on me!"

Cameron handed the little boy in his arms to his wife, shaking Earl's hand. "As long as you weren't the one with a crush on her."

Earl shook his head. "Not at all. And I'm married anyway. I married Charlotte on Friday."

Cameron smiled, looking back and forth between the two. "You have a good woman."

"I know I do. I wouldn't trade her for the world. You and Cassandra should join us at our place for supper on Saturday night. I want to get to know Charlotte's friends and their husbands."

"We'd love to," Cameron said, speaking for both of them. "Is the baby invited or should we leave him with my mother?"

"Whichever you prefer. As far as I'm concerned you can bring your mother as well!"

Charlotte's eyes grew wider and wider as Earl invited more and more people for supper. She wasn't going to be able to put off her shopping trip, even if she wanted to. "I will have to start thinking about what to cook. I don't think I've ever cooked for such a large group."

Earl grinned. "I'll smoke some meat. You can just take care of the sides."

"I'll bring a couple of desserts," Cassandra said. "You shouldn't be roped into cooking for so many when it wasn't even your idea."

"I'll bring a few loaves of bread," Ada said. "Will that help?"

"Now it sounds easy," Charlotte said. "We'll cook all day, won't we, Walt?"

Walt nodded. As far as Earl could tell, he wasn't shy. He just didn't speak. It was odd.

The pastor stood up then and told them which hymn to sing, and everyone took their seats. It was going to be a good day. Earl was certain of it.

Chapter Six

Charlotte spent the afternoon cooking and cleaning her home. She'd planned to take Sundays off now that Earl was there, but he insisted on starting to put in the garden, even though it was still below freezing at night.

While he plowed, Walt walked along beside him, one hand on the plow to help with the workload. Every time Charlotte looked out the window, she could see a huge grin on her son's face, and finally, she stopped where she was and said a quick prayer to thank God for sending Earl into her life. He was a godsend in the truest sense of the word.

She took out cold water a few times, making sure they both were able to drink as much as they wanted. Baking cookies seemed to be a good thing, and she called them in a couple of hours before supper to serve them their treats along with big glasses of milk.

Walt looked to be in his element. He had become Earl's shadow, and surprisingly, Earl was even more patient with the boy than Howard had been. She was starting to think Earl was perfect, but then she remembered that he'd been known as a member of the demon horde. It made her smile to think of him misbehaving as he readily admitted he had.

By supper time, Walt could barely keep his eyes open. It wasn't that Earl had let him do any truly difficult work, but that he wasn't used to hurrying around and "helping" as much as he was. Even when she'd taken him on the range, she'd made sure Walt didn't do too

much. Earl seemed to think it was fine to push the boy past his comfort zone, and Charlotte was pleased to see her son doing so well.

As they sat down, Earl said, “Don’t go falling asleep now, Walt. I still need your help with the milking.”

Walt nodded, but he seemed to be fighting to keep his eyes open. Charlotte knew he would sleep late into the day on Monday, but that wasn’t a bad thing as far as she was concerned.

She’d simply served what was left of the chicken and dumplings from the night before, and Walt had been as eager to eat them again as he had the first time.

“What do you think I should cook for this supper party you have planned?”

Earl shrugged. “I have no idea. I think I’m going to smoke some beef, so if you want to do potatoes and green beans or something, that would be perfect. I know the other ladies will handle the bread and dessert, so you don’t need to worry about that.”

“In all the years I was married to Howard, he never once invited anyone to have supper with us. I always wondered if he was a little bit ashamed of me.”

“Did you go to church together on Sundays?”

Charlotte nodded. “Truly, it was the only thing we did out of the house together.”

“He wasn’t ashamed of you then. If he had been, he’d have found an excuse to miss church and let you and Walt go on your own.”

“That makes sense,” she said.

After supper, Walt went out to help with the milking. He looked like he was about to fall over, and Charlotte started to suggest he go straight to bed, but Earl must have read her mind because he shook his head.

When they came back in, Earl picked Walt up and praised him for putting in a day of men's work. "You did everything I asked you to do. I'm really proud of you, Walt. You're going to grow into a hard-working man, and that's all a papa can ask for from his son."

Walt preened at the words, resting his head on Earl's shoulder.

"I think we should take our hard-working man and put him to bed," Charlotte said, grinning. The way Earl handled Walt was amazing. He was so good with her boy.

Walt snuggled into his bed, too tired to keep his eyes open for another minute. Charlotte smiled down at him and kissed his cheek. "Love you, Walt. We'll see you in the morning."

Once they were out of the room, Charlotte shook her head. "I never would have pushed him so hard. Did you see how tired he was?"

"He was tired, but he was also proud of himself. I have a theory, and I'm going to see how it works."

"What is that?" she asked.

"I think if he gets too tired from me pushing him too much, he'll speak up. I just need you to stand back and let it happen."

She bit her lip, leading the way into the parlor, where they'd taken to spending their time after Walt went to bed. "I'll try. It just doesn't seem like a great idea to me."

Earl shrugged. "Give me a week. If it doesn't work, then I'll stop."

Charlotte was surprised she trusted him so much, but she readily agreed. "All right. I can do that."

"Thank you. I really want to help Walt as much as I can."

"I know you do. Thank you for that. I don't think you have any idea how much I appreciate you treating him as your own."

"It's how I think of him," Earl said, sitting on the sofa. He wasn't sure if he wanted her on the chair or sitting beside him so they could snuggle together. It felt like it might be time for them to grow closer. He'd only been there for a couple of days, but they seemed to be getting along much better than he'd ever expected.

Charlotte moved to sit beside him on the sofa, sitting close beside him. Without thinking, he put his arm around her shoulders. "I think church went well this morning," she said. "I was a little surprised when you started inviting half the congregation to supper on Saturday night, but I'm looking forward to it."

"Good. I was afraid I was trapping you into doing something you'd hate."

She laughed. "I don't know, do I? I've never been to someone's house for supper or invited anyone to mine. It'll be a fresh new experience."

"You've never gone to supper at someone's house? Not ever?" His family hadn't been terribly social, but they had at least had friends they'd shared meals with on occasion. Never having had that experience seemed crazy to Earl.

She shook her head. "Growing up, we were around people as little as possible, for fear they'd realize I was a girl, and I'd be taken away. Then as an adult, my mother-in-law spent time with us, but she hated me, and it showed in everything she said and did. I was happy when she went back to Connecticut."

"Did Howard come from money?" he asked. It seemed to make sense from the little he'd heard about her first husband.

"He did. His mother saw him as someone who would be a lawyer or a banker someday, and he ended up in the west ranching. She said it made her stomach turn to see him throwing his life away the way he was."

"She sounds like a lovely woman. I so wish I could meet her." The sarcasm was so thick in his voice that Charlotte could do nothing but laugh.

"I managed to get through it all. As soon as I was expecting, she said she'd taught me all she could and went home. She never did meet Walt, which is just fine with me. She'd have found fault with him simply because he was my child."

Earl toward her, sighing. "I wish the first half of your life had been as good as I plan to make the rest of it."

She smiled at that. "You really are a good man, Earl. I'm glad you were the one to respond to my letter."

"My sister said she read it and knew it was meant for me. I almost refused to read it at all. She's sent some of our brothers to marry before, and I didn't want to be just another Miller brother expected to marry a stranger." He shook his head, caressing her cheek

with the back of one finger. “She was right though. I felt you calling to me with that letter. I knew I was meant to be your husband.”

“You really don’t mind my reputation, do you?”

“I think your reputation is ridiculous. People can think what they like about you, and I’ll still be at your side. I promised for better or for worse, and this is for worse.” He leaned down and brushed his lips softly against hers. “I think I’m ready to be more familiar.”

She raised an eyebrow. “I’m not ready for you in my bed yet.”

“That’s just fine with me. I’m not ready for that either. I am however ready for just a bit of kissing and touching.”

She smiled. “That sounds good to me.” Turning more fully toward him on the sofa, she touched his cheek with her fingers, feeling the stubble that came from not having shaved in a while. “Are you growing a beard?”

He shrugged. “I thought I might. Beards seem to be the norm around here. Why should I be different? Back east, most men are clean-shaven it seems. At least that’s how it is in Beckham. But here? I can let my beard grow to the middle of my chest, and no one will think a thing of it.”

“I think I like it,” Charlotte told him, wondering if her opinion would affect what he did.

“Then I’ll keep it. You just let me know when it gets too long, and I’ll consider trimming it.”

“My opinion matters?” she asked.

Earl nodded, smiling. “You’re my wife. You have to look at me more than anyone else does. Of course, your opinion matters.”

She laughed at that. “Then I’ll let you know what my opinion is as soon as I’ve figured it out.”

He leaned toward her then, pressing his lips against hers again. There had been little kissing between him and Patsy because of her history with men, but kissing Charlotte felt right. Absolutely perfect.

Charlotte put her hands on his shoulders and tilted her head, inviting him to deepen the kiss. His touch made her feel so much—more than Howard’s ever had, which made her feel both guilty and excited at the same time.

His kiss made it feel as if something was zinging through her body. It felt so good, and she wondered how it would feel to have him within her. All at once, that’s what she wanted—to make love with her new husband.

When he raised his head, she wanted to yell that she wasn’t finished yet, but instead she stared at him through heavy lidded eyes. “I think I like kissing you, husband.”

“I certainly hope so. I enjoy kissing you too.” He rested his forehead against hers. “I should head to bed, but let’s meet here at the same time tomorrow night and do this all over again.”

She laughed softly. “I’d be happy to oblige.” She watched him as he walked toward the stairs to go up to bed. For a second, she considered inviting him to sleep in her bed instead, but she decided it was better this way. If they took things slowly, then they would both be ready when they did finally make love. It just wouldn’t be tonight.

By the end of their first full week together, Charlotte was in a

tizzy. She had never felt so much passion for anyone in her life, and she was ready to share Earl's bed. Their kisses after Walt went to bed—along with their discussions about anything and everything under the sun—made her feel closer to Earl than she ever had anyone in her life.

On Saturday, he got up early and started a fire in the pit he'd dug the day before, putting a grate over it that he'd found in the barn when he'd been cleaning it earlier in the week. Then he placed the huge slab of meat on the grate to smoke all day long. He'd come back and stoke the fire every couple of hours. He knew he could ask Charlotte to do it, but he was excited to do it himself.

Once everything was set up just like he wanted it, he went inside to have breakfast. Charlotte made biscuits with a sausage gravy and scrambled eggs. It wasn't something he'd ever had for breakfast, but he had to admit, it was absolutely wonderful.

After breakfast, he kissed his wife goodbye, each morning kiss lasting longer than the last. "It's hard not to linger here with you all day. Soon, it won't matter if you want to wait. I'll be dragging you off to your bed before you can say no." With that, he put his hat on his head and left to start the day with his men, all of whom were still helping him with the round-up of the calves.

Charlotte stood staring at the closed door behind him, and she realized that they both were ready for a more intimate relationship, but neither was ready to say it. Now that she knew, she'd act accordingly.

Saturday was laundry day for her, so she got that out of the way

first thing, and then she began the process of carrying everything Earl had brought with him down the stairs to her room. Maybe when he realized that all his belongings were where they belonged, he'd join them. You never could tell though. She'd seen a stubborn streak in the man over their time together.

When Walt woke, it was almost noon. He was sleeping later and later, but not a word had been spoken yet. Earl swore he'd seen his mouth move like he was about to say something, but he'd closed it without a word.

"Do you want breakfast or lunch?" Charlotte asked him.

When he didn't respond, she sighed. "Do you want breakfast? I made biscuits and gravy."

He shook his head.

"Do you want to wait to eat with Earl?"

Walt nodded, smiling.

"You like your new papa a lot, don't you?"

He nodded again.

"You know, Papa has never heard you talk. I think your voice is the most beautiful sound in the whole world. He would love to hear it, just like I do. Do you think maybe you can talk for him?"

Walt tilted his head to one side, seeming to consider what she said. Finally, he shrugged.

She gave him a biscuit so he wouldn't be too hungry while they waited for Earl to eat with them, but she hoped they were getting through to him. Hopefully, Walt would soon discover that he had things that needed to be said.

After the wash was finished drying, she folded it and put it away, giving the house a good scrubbing. Not that it was dirty, but with company coming, she wanted it to be as clean as it could possibly be.

While she worked, Walt followed behind her, taking on little chores. “Would you wipe up the muddy footprints in front of the door?” she asked.

Walt nodded, rushing to do her bidding.

She had a light lunch of soup and sandwiches waiting, so whenever Earl came back, she would be ready to feed him. The man seemed to always be hungry, but he cooked more than his fair share, and she had no complaints. He was good for her, and he was good to her.

When Earl came in, he looked exhausted. “Did something happen?” she asked, hurrying to him.

He shook his head. “I had to fire another of the men today, which makes us all have to work just a bit harder.”

She frowned. “Over me?”

He chuckled. “Not this time. He wasn’t doing his job properly, using spurs on his horse. I don’t care who he is. No one is going to abuse an animal around me.”

“Good for you.” She kissed him softly. “Sit down, and I’ll have lunch on the table in a minute. Everything’s ready.”

He removed his hat and sat down, looking at Walt, who was staring at him with wide eyes. “How are you doing today, Walt?”

Walt just smiled.

Earl took that as good and took a bite of the soup. It was a hearty chicken with rice soup, and it was wonderful. “It’s the end of May. When is it going to stop frosting overnight?”

Charlotte laughed. “It’ll do it some all through the summer. Montana can never decide if it’s summer or winter, it seems. I’ve seen snow every month of the year here.”

“I’m not sure how I feel about that. I mean, I’ll be happy not to have the heat of the summer on me, but a break from frosts would be nice. I hope they don’t hurt my garden!”

She’d already figured out how much he loved that garden of his, so she simply agreed. “Hopefully not.”

As soon as he was gone after lunch, she got back to work scrubbing. It was going to be a long day of hard work. But she wasn’t sure if there was any other kind of day.

Chapter Seven

Earl finished work early for the day, and immediately checked on his meat. He wanted it perfectly tender, not burnt. It seemed good to him, so he headed inside the house to check on Charlotte and Walt.

Walt was standing on a chair turned backwards, helping Charlotte mash the potatoes she'd made for their guests.

She turned her head to receive Earl's kiss. "How was your day?"

He nodded. "Ready for branding on Monday and Tuesday. I think. I hope." He grinned. "Never having done it, I have no idea how to tell whether we're ready or not."

"I'm sure you are. You're not the type of man to leave anything to chance."

"No, I'm not." He ran his fingers through his hair. "Meat is just about done. I'm going to need something to carry it in from the fire." It was colder that day, seeming to hover barely above freezing, which did not bode well for the planting he wanted to do the following day.

"Good. I'll have everything in here done in the next few minutes. I made carrots, peas, green beans, and mash potatoes. There's plenty of everything. I can't believe I'm so nervous." She lifted Walt off the chair onto the floor and wiped her hands on her apron. "What time is everyone supposed to be here?"

"In about fifteen minutes," he said. "Do you have a roasting pan I can use?"

She nodded, going to the pantry beside the kitchen to get it for him. "Will this work?"

He nodded, carrying it outside. "This would be good for turkey for Thanksgiving too," he called over his shoulder before realizing she and Walt had followed him.

"I use it for that. We didn't bother with Thanksgiving last year, but I'm feeling a great deal more thankful this year than I was then."

"You should have sent for me sooner," he told her. "It makes me sad to think of how hard you worked for a full year."

"It was my choice," she said. "I could have sold it all. There were men wanting to buy."

"I'm sure there were." He shook his head. "You have a wonderful location here, with the Royal River cutting through the property. Water seems to be in great demand here, and I'm just happy we don't have to fight for it."

She nodded. "When Howard bought this place, he made sure to buy the land that held the river upstream as well. This river starts at the top of that mountain over there, then goes through our property, and then cuts through Wade and Ada's and then through the Royals'. I think it even goes through Cauldron Valley Ranch and the Calendars' property," she said pointing. "He'd read a dime novel about how men would dam up rivers so they wouldn't flow to other people's properties. He made sure that would never happen to him."

Earl smiled. "How long did he live here before the two of you got married?"

"Only about a year." She watched him as he put the meat from the grill into the roasting pan and carried it inside, with Walt a step behind him the whole way. "Walt, you need to go comb your hair."

Our guests will be here soon.”

Walt didn't seem to know what to make of the idea they would have guests, but he hurried out of the room and did as he was told.

Earl took the opportunity to put his arms around his wife. “You're not nervous about tonight, are you?”

“Me? Nervous about the first time I will ever have guests in my home. Oh, of course not.” She grinned at him, wrapping her arms around his neck. “I have a secret that I'm going to share with you as soon as everyone has gone home.”

“Oh? Tell me now. I don't like secrets.”

“Sorry. You're just going to have to wait!” She heard a wagon pull into the yard, and she extricated herself from his arms. “Someone's here!”

“We're expecting people. Don't seem so shocked!”

She sighed. “I've never done this before. Why are we doing this again?”

“So, we can get to know our friends and neighbors and form closer bonds with them. That way if anything happens to either one of us, the other will have people to rely on.”

Charlotte walked to the door and opened it wide, seeing that it was Ada, with Wade and the baby. As promised, she carried a basket that Charlotte had to assume was filled with bread. Wade carried the baby. “I didn't think to ask if babies were invited,” Wade said, but we thought it was best if we didn't leave her home alone.”

Earl sighed. “I suppose we'll have to put up with her then.”

Ada stepped into the house and smiled. “Your home is beautiful,

Charlotte. So clean!”

“Walt and I scrubbed all day.” Charlotte shook her head. “I probably shouldn’t have said that and just pretended my home is always spotless.”

Ada laughed. “With as much as you had to work on the ranch in the past year if your home was always spotless, I would think you never slept.”

“I barely slept as it was,” Charlotte agreed with a laugh.

Another wagon pulled into the yard and Charlotte and Ada both turned to greet Cassandra and Cameron, as well as Cameron’s mother. “We’re certainly going to have a full house tonight,” Charlotte said. She’d never once had the opportunity to use her dining room, finding it easier to eat in the kitchen since it was just the three of them. There was a beautiful oak table with ten chairs in the dining room, however, and she was excited to use it for the first time. She’d even set the table with her best dishes. “Come in!”

Cassandra walked up to the house carrying the baby while Mrs. Royal carried two pies. “I thought we might want two pies with so many of us,” Mrs. Royal said, looking excited to be invited for supper. “Your home is just beautiful, Charlotte.”

“Oh, thank you,” Charlotte said. “Please come in, and we’ll eat while the food is hot.”

As everyone sat at the dining table, Charlotte carried in all the dishes. She was happy to have everyone at her home now that it was actually happening, and she didn’t have to fret about it.

Once everything was on the table, Charlotte took her seat at the

foot of the table, while Earl sat at the head. They bowed their heads, and Earl prayed for good fellowship, a filling meal, and a good branding.

The men immediately dominated the conversation. “You haven’t done your branding and castration yet?” Cameron asked.

Earl shook his head. “Give me a minute. I’ve only been here a week, and I was a farmer back in Beckham. This whole ranching thing is new to me.”

“Do you need help?” Wade asked. “I would be happy to come lend my expertise for the day.”

Cameron nodded. “I would too. Wade was my foreman for a long time, and he knows how to lead men. It might be easier for you to have backup the first time.”

Earl looked between the two men. “Do you think it would make me look weak in front of the men?”

Cameron laughed. “All any of the men could talk about at church last week was you knocking Johnny on his backside... repeatedly. No one is going to think you’re weak after that. Trust me.”

Looking sheepish, Earl rubbed the back of his neck. “I was defending my wife’s honor.”

“About time too,” Cameron said. “Between you and me, I think her first husband encouraged all the rumors. He didn’t want there to be competition for her.”

Earl’s eyes widened and he quickly glanced down at his wife, who was engrossed in a conversation with the women, and obviously hadn’t heard. He’d had a feeling life between Charlotte and Howard

hadn't been as perfect as she made it seem. "Not now," he said softly, and Cameron nodded, looking a bit embarrassed.

Walt sat next to Earl, watching his every move, and Earl was worried the boy had heard what Cameron had said about his father. No one should have to be disillusioned about their father that way. Hopefully he hadn't caught it.

"Walt's been a huge help to me around here, showing me the ropes. He milks the cow every night, and he even helped me plow a patch for our kitchen garden."

Walt's face lit up at the praise.

"Is that so?" Wade asked. "I sure wish I had a helper like that. I just have a girl."

"And a beautiful girl at that," Cameron said, nodding toward the wives.

"She sure is a beauty," Earl replied. "I think I'm luckier though, because I have a man who is willing to work at my side. Right, Walt?"

Walt nodded looking excited.

After supper, the men went outside to talk while the ladies worked together to get the dishes done. "You don't have to help me," Charlotte protested for what seemed like the hundredth time.

"If you come to my house for supper, I sure hope you won't leave me with all the dishes," Ada said. "It's better this way. We all help each other out."

Cassandra nodded. "I'll wash, Ada will dry, and you put everything away because you know where it goes."

Mrs. Royal sat at the kitchen table, a baby on each knee. "I'll

just sit here with the babies.”

Cassandra smiled at her mother-in-law. “I know that’s where you’re happiest.”

“Where’s Walt?” Charlotte asked, only then realizing he was missing.

“Oh, I’m sure he’s out with the men,” Ada said. “He seems to be really taken with Earl.”

“He is! I never dreamed he’d latch onto him that way. From the instant we laid eyes on him, Walt has only wanted to be close to him. Every morning he searches the house for him, and I have to remind him that he’s out working on the ranch.”

Cassandra laughed. “I guess that’s better than hating him, isn’t it?”

“Oh, I’m not complaining one little bit. Earl is really good with him and treats him as if he was his own child.” Charlotte couldn’t believe how entwined her life had become with Earl’s even though he’d only been there for a week.

Mrs. Royal said from the table, “That’s wonderful. I was raised by my father and my stepmother, and she made it clear every day until I moved out that she didn’t like me, and I had no right to be there. I’m glad Earl knows how to show love to your son.”

“Me too,” Charlotte said. She’d never even thought about how bad it could be until her new husband arrived. She didn’t know what she would have done if he hadn’t accepted Walt as his own. She’d been very fortunate with the man who had come to marry her.

When the women finished with the dishes, the men came back

inside and they all talked for a short while, but again, they seemed to split between men and women. It was something Charlotte had never noticed before. “Why do the men talk to just the other men, and the women to just the other women?” she finally asked after observing the odd split.

Mrs. Royal was the one to respond. “The men have more in common to discuss. They talk about the weather and ranching, among other things. We women don’t have a lot of interest in those things, but we can talk about our favorite receipts and what kind of sewing projects we have coming up as well as the children. Well, we can talk about anything we want, but you’ll notice those have been our main topics of conversation tonight.”

Charlotte thought about it for a moment. “You’re right. And when I catch the odd word the men are saying, they do seem to be talking a lot about the branding on Monday. I guess it makes sense. I’ve just never noticed it before.”

Ada laughed. “Oh, it happens at every party. Back east when I was going to dance after dance, the men would only talk to the ladies if they were asking them to dance. My mother could never figure out why I couldn’t find a man that way. I kept telling her I wanted to know more about a man than how well he could waltz.”

The other women laughed. Finally, Cassandra stood. “It’s getting late, and we have church in the morning. I think we need to say goodnight.”

Charlotte got to her feet as well. “I’m so glad you all came,” she said. “I’ve never had so much fun in my life.”

Ada and Cassandra shared a look. “We’re going to invite you to make jam with us this summer,” Cassandra said. “Then you’ll see what fun really is.”

Charlotte realized then what she’d been missing out on. Now she had real friends, and it would keep her going no matter what.

As the others left, she looked down at Walt. “I think it’s time for you to go to bed.”

Walt looked annoyed, but he was obedient as always, allowing Earl to carry him to his room. After they’d said their goodnights, they closed the door behind them, and Charlotte turned to Earl. “Ready for your surprise?”

Chapter Eight

“I thought it was a secret.” The look Earl gave Charlotte was of utter confusion.

“It’s both!” She took his hand and pulled him toward her bedroom, and his eyes widened. When she opened her door, and he could see his things scattered about in her room, including a photograph of Patsy, he froze.

“I can’t do this yet,” he said, shaking his head. “Especially not with Patsy watching.” He turned and hurried away from her, going to the barn to milk Sally. Once he reached the barn, he heaved a deep breath.

He was torn. More than anything in the world, he wanted to make love with his wife, but the memories of Patsy and her love for him weren’t going anywhere.

He stared at the cow for a good long while before pulling up the three-legged milking stool and grabbing the milk pail from its hook on the wall. His motions were slow and deliberate as he thought about the last time he saw his sweet Patsy’s face. Did it mean he was giving up on their love if he was physical with another woman?

Of course, the other woman was his wife, and someone he had deep respect for, but he wasn’t yet in love with Charlotte. Maybe that should be his line. As soon as he loved Charlotte—and he didn’t think that moment was far into the future—then he would make love with his wife.

He thought for a moment about how Charlotte would feel about

Patsy. Without a doubt he knew the two of them would become friends, forming a barrier against the outside world that had treated them so poorly.

Patsy was never able to find love and encouragement after her return from slavery. And that's exactly what she'd been. A slave to several men who passed her around, sharing her sexual favors. Without that love and support she'd needed so badly from someone other than him, she hadn't been able to bear to stay in the world who saw her so poorly.

Earl couldn't stop thinking about his last conversation with her. She'd tried to call off their wedding.

"We can't get married, Earl. No one in this town will ever see me as anything but a fallen woman. They look at me and imagine the different men I've been with, and they think so much less of me."

"Then we'll go get some land from Uncle Sam. I hear there's still plenty of land out west, free for anyone who is willing to stake their claim and prove up their property. I've been looking into it. I know that if we're away from people who know you, we're going to have a perfect marriage."

He tried to kiss her, but she'd turned her head. "That's not the only problem. I don't know if I could be with another man after the way they... treated me."

"I'm not them. I'll give you as much time as you need." He gazed deeply into her troubled brown eyes. "Patsy, you know we can be happy, if we can just get away from the people in this town who think so little of you."

"I don't know why you don't think little of me." She shook her head.

"I'm going away for the weekend to the shore with my mother and sisters. I'll do a lot of thinking there, and I hope I can come to some conclusions about what I need to do with my life."

"I don't know why you're questioning this all of a sudden," Earl said, feeling like she was taking back her words of love, and her vow to be his wife.

"It's not all of a sudden. I've always questioned it. I remember telling you when you asked me to marry you that I wasn't sure we could make it work. Remember?" Her hand had gone to his cheek, and he could tell she was trying to soften the blow.

He frowned. "When you come back, you'll feel better about everything. You know how much you've always loved the ocean."

She smiled, but it was a sad smile. "I have always loved the ocean." She stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek. "I do love you with everything inside of me."

"And I love you. See? It's working out already."

It was the last time he'd seen her. Other than her funeral of course, but he hadn't seen her then. Just the cold box that they'd buried her in.

He liked to pretend that last conversation had never happened between them. That they'd been in love, and everything was going to be perfect. Looking back at it, he knew better.

Of course, he could see everything clearly now. But then...he'd been so sure their love could heal any wounds she bore from her ordeal.

The news of her death had shaken him to the core. He couldn't

help but wonder if she'd drowned herself to keep him from feeling the hurt of her refusal to marry him. Of course, that wouldn't be the only reason, but Patsy had been through so much, and she'd been unsure she could ever live a normal life. She'd said even her sisters looked at her strangely, as if they didn't know the woman she'd become.

And Earl had ignored it all, convinced that he could heal her. But it wasn't possible. He didn't know details of the year and a half she'd been gone, and he didn't *want* to know. The way she'd been treated had been beyond anything a woman should experience.

He finished milking Sally and walked toward the house, wondering what on earth he should say to Charlotte. Patsy was his past, and Charlotte was his future, but sometimes he felt as if Patsy's ghost stood right between them. Perhaps telling her that would help, but...He knew she was grieving as well.

Once inside, he realized the house was completely quiet, and thought Charlotte must have gone to bed. He poured the milk into a pitcher and put the pitcher into the ice box.

When he turned away from the ice box, there she was, standing in the middle of the kitchen. "I'm sorry if you felt like I was trying to push you into something you weren't ready for," Charlotte said softly. She was in her nightgown, but he could see how red her eyes were. She'd been crying, and it was his fault.

"You did nothing wrong. I feel so much for you, but it's passion. It's not love like I felt for Patsy, and I feel like I'm betraying her for even considering marrying another woman."

Charlotte nodded. "I've spoken a lot about Howard. Why don't

you tell me about Patsy?” She took his hand and led him into the parlor, sitting beside him on the sofa, ready to listen. “What did she look like?”

“She was the most beautiful girl in all of Beckham. Her hair was brown, as were her eyes. I swear she looked like someone who had just stepped out of a storybook. When she got back from what I like to term her ordeal, she had a scar on her forehead, near her hairline. It was the only way she was different physically.”

Charlotte gripped his hand tightly, knowing this conversation was difficult for him. “How did she get the scar?”

He looked at her for a moment, startled. “I don’t know. I never thought to ask. I just kissed the scar, and I told her our love would mend all her scars.”

She frowned. “How long was she back before you began courting her?”

“We were courting before she was taken, and then as soon as she came back, we resumed our relationship, of course. I knew that people didn’t think much of her, so I asked her to marry me. I knew if she was in a good relationship, people wouldn’t look down on her the way they did.”

Charlotte shook her head. “It doesn’t work that way.”

“I know that now. She came to me to break off our engagement right before she left with her family to go to the coast. It was always her favorite thing to do, be near the ocean, and her family would go for a week every summer. She told me that she didn’t think it would work for her to be married at all, but I argued with her. I told her that

our love could fix everything wrong with her.”

“Go on.”

“I found out just days later that she’d drowned in the ocean. No one told me if it was an accident or not. I think they feared I would blame myself if it wasn’t. And I *did* blame myself.” He shook his head. “I realize now I never should have pushed her to even try to have a life with me. Not with all she’d been through.”

“Do you still love her?” Charlotte asked.

He thought about that for a long moment before answering. “I think I love the idea of her. I loved the girl she was before everything happened, and when she got back, I just wanted to fix her and make everything right again.”

“Which makes a lot of sense. You are the kind of man who wants to fix those around him and make everything better. I don’t know that she could be better after what happened to her.”

“I don’t know either, but I had to try. But maybe I should have been a little less forceful in my attempt.”

“You can’t blame yourself. You were doing everything you thought was right to make her happy again.” Charlotte sighed. “It must have been a very difficult situation for everyone involved. How did your parents feel about you marrying her?”

“My parents were very hands off about everything after their first four children. I don’t remember ever being disciplined as a child, unless one of my older sisters did it.” Earl shook his head. “Her parents were very protective of her. She and her sisters always walked in pairs, and they were never alone outside the house. They came

from a wealthier family, not like the family Ada came from, but definitely wealthier than mine. She and her sister were walking together, and something caught her eye in a store window. She stopped to look, and it took a minute for her sister to even realize she was missing. When she did realize, Patsy was gone.”

“I’m sure that was really hard for her sister.”

“Do you ever wonder about your parents? The people who gave birth to you? Why were you left on the side of the road?”

She shook her head. “I’ve always wondered. There may be a woman out there who is heartbroken, looking for her child still. Or there may have been seven of us, and I was the one who got forgotten as they left, and by the time they came back, I was gone. More likely, I was one too many mouths to feed, or my mother wasn’t married. It doesn’t really matter now.”

“I guess not.” But he had to wonder if there was a way to go about finding her parents. He stopped himself though. If he and Patsy had moved west, it would have been to escape the past. There was no reason for him to dredge up the past for someone else.

“So, it sounds like you did some soul-searching outside, am I right?”

He nodded. “I thought about everything that’s happened to both of us over the years. I...I want to make love with you. More than anything else in the world. But I need you to know I’m not sure I love you yet.”

“I don’t know if I love you either. But we’re married, and I see no harm in finding comfort in each other’s arms.”

“It wouldn’t bother you?” He was growing more excited by the idea every minute.

“Not at all. I think it’s something that will come very naturally between us. We enjoy touching each other and kissing one another. Why wouldn’t we want to make love?” She shrugged. “I didn’t love Howard when I married him. It came with time. We married because I wanted to be respectable, and he was looking for a wife.”

“Do you ever regret marrying him?”

She shook her head. “No, because if I hadn’t, I wouldn’t have Walt, and that boy is everything to me.”

Earl smiled at that. “I think he’s pretty darn special too. I just wish he’d speak.”

“I think he’s close. I don’t know why he stopped talking.”

He took a deep breath. “How would you feel if I slept in my own bed tonight, and maybe we plan to make love tomorrow night? Or even the next? Maybe it should be my celebration after branding. I don’t want you to think I’m not attracted to you, because that’s not it at all. I want you. I just have to get my mind to quit making me feel like I’m betraying Patsy.”

She nodded. “I think that sounds good. I’m sorry if it felt like I was rushing you. That was never my intention. When you said that you had been thinking about it this morning, I took that as an invitation, and I shouldn’t have.”

He leaned down and brushed his lips across hers. “Thank you so much for understanding.”

“Of course! I know Howard would have wanted me to remarry.

Not for Walt, but for the sake of the ranch. He would have hated all of his years of hard work to have gone down the drain.”

Earl was again perplexed by her relationship with her first husband. Something wasn't right there, and he didn't think she even realized it.

Chapter Nine

After two days of branding and castrating calves, Earl felt like he'd been trampled by the entire herd. He walked into the house, shaking his head. "I've never dreamed of working that hard in my life."

It was late Tuesday night, and Charlotte had supper ready for him, as she always did. Once he was seated, she put supper on the table in front of him, Walt watching him as if he was a hero.

"Fried chicken?" he asked. "You remembered!" He'd told her during one of their late-night talks that fried chicken with mashed potatoes and gravy was his favorite meal.

She smiled. "Of course, I did. Besides, I think Walt is going to love it."

"He's never had fried chicken?" Earl asked, surprised. "Why have you been depriving this boy his entire life?"

"This is my first time to make it," she admitted. "I had Mrs. Royal write down a receipt for it on Sunday so I could make it as a celebration meal when branding was finally over." She shook her head. "I cannot express how thankful I am that you were here in time for me not to have to do it alone."

"It was a huge job for more than twenty men. What would it have been like to do it alone?" he asked. "I don't even want to think about it."

"We don't have to, since you came to my rescue and handled it for me." She sat down across from him and joined hands with him and

Walt for their prayer.

Once they'd said their amens, Earl took his first bite of the chicken, and sighed happily. "It's delicious."

"Oh good. I was worried you wouldn't like it."

She'd given Walt a drumstick, thinking it would be the easiest thing for him to eat, and he had lifted it and started gnawing at it. "Do you like it, Walt?"

The boy nodded.

When she tried it, she smiled. "I'll have to make this again. I've never tried fried chicken, but it's rather good."

Earl gaped at Charlotte. "You've never even eaten fried chicken?"

She shook her head. "The man who raised me wasn't fond of chicken, so he told me not to cook those receipts in the book. Howard never asked for it, so I never even thought about fixing it. It wasn't even in my mind that chicken *could* be fried."

"But you make delicious chicken and dumplings!"

"They were a meal that Howard's mother was fond of, and I learned to make them from her. Then Walt loved them, so I kept making them." She shrugged. "I don't have a lot of experience with food or anything else. The only towns I've ever been to are Mountain Home and Cauldron Valley. I've been inside one church. Never went to school." She shrugged. "Maybe someday, I'll get to experience more things."

"We're going to have to find a foreman we trust, so we can head back east on the train. I think visiting my family for a week would be

just the kind of thing we'd both enjoy."

"I'm not sure I want this demon horde of yours around Walt."

He laughed. "They would just show him how to have a good time. You know, snakes and frogs in the teacher's desk...tying people into outhouses. Good clean fun!"

"You should be ashamed you ever even considered those things fun."

"Probably. And yet, I'm not." Earl winked at her, and Charlotte couldn't help but laugh.

Walt looked back and forth between the two of them as if he was trying to figure out what was so funny. "Do you want to go visit my family, Walt? There are children your age who would love to play!"

Walt shook his head adamantly.

Charlotte was surprised. "You don't like other children?" she asked.

He shook his head again.

Earl had to wonder what was going on in the boy's head. There was something he couldn't figure out how to tell them. Earl was certain of it.

Walt followed along to help milk the cow as he usually did that night, and Earl decided to ask some questions and see what would happen. "Have other children been mean to you?" he asked.

Walt shook his head, his eyes going to something on the wall behind Earl. When Earl turned his head to see what it was, there was nothing there but some old, broken reins.

Earl set up the stool and handed Walt the pail, and the boy milked the cow carefully just as he'd been taught.

While he milked, Earl kept trying. "Walt, why don't you talk?"

Walt shrugged.

"Are you afraid to talk?"

Walt nodded.

Earl wasn't sure why a boy his age would ever be afraid to talk, but he knew he had to keep pressing, since Walt was finally answering questions in his own way. "You know that there's nothing to be afraid of here, right?"

Walt's eyes went again to the wall of the barn, and Earl looked at the rein. He reached out and touched it and Walt covered his head with both arms.

Earl suddenly understood. "Did someone hit you with this?" He left the rein where it was and went to kneel beside the boy on the hard floor of the barn.

Walt nodded. "P...papa."

"Your father hit you with this? That's terrible. Walt, I promise you, I will never hit you. Do you understand?"

Walt nodded, tears streaming down his face. Earl gathered the boy to him and got to his feet, carrying him to the house. He'd go back and finish milking Sally in a bit. Walt was more important at that moment.

When they reached the kitchen, Charlotte turned from the dishes with a smile. "Finished so soon?"

Earl nodded. "Walt just told me something."

Charlotte dried her hands on her apron and looked excited. “He spoke?”

“Yes, he did. He told me his papa hit him with the horse rein.”

“What?” Charlotte was shocked. Howard hadn’t been the type of man to hit children. She knew he wasn’t. “That’s not possible.”

Walt pulled away from Earl’s shoulder. “He did!” he shouted at his mother.

“Oh, Walt. I believe you, sweetheart.” She took her son from Earl’s arms and held him close. “When did he do that?” Howard hadn’t spent much time with Walt, other than in the evenings a couple times a week, he would take Walt out to milk the cow with him. “I’m so sorry, baby. I didn’t know.”

“He...he made me promise not to tell. He said I was a bad boy.”

Charlotte shook her head. “You’ve always been a good boy. Every single day. I don’t know why he would say that to you. Or hurt you. I wish you could have told me.”

“I was afraid.”

“I understand that. Are you afraid still?”

“A little.” It seemed as if the dam had broken, and Walt was willing to say anything now.

“Are you afraid of me?”

Walt shook his head, his hair flopping, and Charlotte thought once again it was time to cut his hair. “Are you afraid of Earl?”

“He’s my new papa. I love him.”

Earl felt tears prickling the back of his eyes, and his throat felt so tight. “I love you too, Walt. Don’t ever forget it.”

“What are you afraid of then?”

“The thing he hit me with.” Walt seemed to know exactly why he was afraid. “And my other papa.”

“You know Papa can’t come back and hurt you, right?”

Walt shrugged.

“People can’t come back and hurt others. Not after they die. It’s not possible.”

Listening to her words of comfort to Walt, Earl thought about them himself. Patsy’s death couldn’t keep hurting him unless he let it. She wasn’t going to come back and kill herself again. She was at peace, and that meant he needed to be ready to move on and become a real part of this little family.

“I promise, Walt, if anyone ever tries to hurt you again, all you have to do is tell me,” Earl said. “I’ll knock them down!”

Walt giggled. “You can do that?”

“I sure can. I’m strong from working so hard. Just like you are. You have to be strong enough to tell Mama and me when something bad happens, so we can take care of you. You can’t be afraid all the time.”

Walt seemed to consider what Earl was saying. “I will.”

“Now, I think it’s time for a certain young man to go to bed.”

“I have to milk Sally!”

Earl smiled. “You’re right. You do. Come on. Let’s go get that cow taken care of so we can have some milk with our breakfast.” He took Walt’s hand and the two of them headed out to the barn to take care of the cow.

As Charlotte finished the dishes, she couldn't help but wonder why Howard had been cruel to Walt. There was no reason for it. He definitely wasn't the good man she'd always thought he was.

She got all of the dishes put away and her kitchen was spick and span again. She wanted to go out and join Walt and Earl, but she knew it was time to let her men be together. They couldn't be a real family if they didn't spend time together.

When they came back in, Walt seemed to be telling a story. "And then he fell in the mud!" Walt laughed uproariously at the end, and Earl joined in.

Though she had no idea what had been said before, Charlotte laughed as well. It was just so nice to hear Walt talking again. And now he was speaking in full sentences, something he'd never done before. Maybe when his papa had made him promise not to tell about being hit, he'd thought he should just stop talking and not say anything at all.

Earl and Charlotte tucked him into bed together, and Charlotte kissed his forehead. "Thanks for telling us what happened, Walt."

Walt nodded. "It's my job to tell when people hurt me. Or if I see someone hurt someone else. It's part of being a man."

Charlotte smiled and nodded. "It is." She knew those words were Earl's, but she didn't mind at all. She couldn't think of a better influence for her son.

As they left Walt's room and closed the door, she flung herself into Earl's arms. "Thank you so much!"

"I didn't do anything," he said, but he knew differently. Pushing

Walt as he had got the boy talking again and talking about things neither of the adults wanted to think about. “How do you feel about what he said?”

Charlotte shook her head. “It’s so hard to believe. Howard was a small man, only an inch or two taller than I am. He never seemed to be violent, and I saw him back down from several fights.”

“That makes sense.”

“It does?”

“Sure. When a man is small, and he can’t fight others, he sometimes looks for something smaller than him to hurt. In Howard’s case, Walt was it.”

“That’s really sad. I’d rather he’d beaten me than Walt.” She was livid, thinking of the man she’d been married to for seven years, hurting her innocent child—a boy who had cared for nothing as much as pleasing others.

“Would you have stayed with him if he’d beaten you?” Earl asked.

She laughed. “No, I would have moved back up on top of the mountain in the cabin where I was raised, and I’d have taken my child with me. Why would I do anything else?”

Earl smiled. “And that’s why he didn’t hit you. He *knew* you wouldn’t stay. He had to choose a victim who wouldn’t fight back but would stick around and let it continue to happen. Walt was perfect.”

“How do you know all this?”

He shrugged. “I’ve been a listener my whole life. If someone needed to get anger or sadness off their chest, I was there for them.

You learn a lot that way.”

“I guess that’s better than being the town outcast.”

He frowned for a moment. “I wonder if there’s more to that than you know. Could Howard have been saying things about you that made people avoid you?”

“I don’t think so!” But how would she know? No one really spoke to her until the last year or a little more. “It’s possible, I guess.”

“I’ll investigate, and we’ll figure it out. But first, there’s something else I need to do.”

“Oh? What’s that?”

He surprised her by sweeping her into his arms and carrying her into her bedroom. “I think I need to make love with my wife.”

“Is that so?” She grinned at him, happy that he was finally ready.

“It is!” He set her on the floor and leaned down, kissing her softly. “Except I don’t exactly know what I’m doing. Perhaps you can help me.”

“I’ll do my best!” Her fingers went to the buttons at the collar of his shirt, and she worked her way down the front of him. “I remember what you looked like standing in my kitchen the day you arrived. I’ve been wanting to get your shirt off you ever since.”

“My shirt?” he asked.

“Yeah, I really liked how you looked without it, and I was wanting to get it off again so I could see it.”

He shook his head. “Does that mean you were standing there with a rifle pointed at me admiring my chest?”

“And shoulders,” she said. “I really like your shoulders.”

He laughed. “I would have thought you could like the fact that I cooked for you best, but no, you like my lack of shirt.”

“Why weren’t you wearing a shirt, by the way?”

He shrugged out of his shirt, turned her around, and unbuttoned the back of her dress. “The man who told me how to get here told me you’d be working on the range until late in the evening. So, I heated up water and took a bath in your kitchen while you and Walt were away. I kept thinking I heard someone, and I was worried the first time we met I’d be missing a lot more than a shirt.”

She laughed. “Well, I guess that makes sense. And you just never took the time to put your shirt back on?”

He shrugged. “I was hoping you’d like my chest and shoulders.” He pushed her dress off her and let it fall into a pile on the floor.

“You did not!”

“No, but *now* I wish I had!” He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her passionately. Within seconds, his tongue explored her mouth even as his hands moved over her body.

Her arms went around him, and she sighed contentedly. Touching him was more than anything she’d ever dreamed of. It was pure heaven as far as she was concerned.

When he covered her body with his, she felt nothing but pleasure. He stumbled a little, but it didn’t matter. He more than made up for his lack of knowledge with enthusiasm.

Afterward, he lay beside her, with her snuggled close against him. “Why did I think I needed to wait for that? If I’d known it would

feel that good, I really would have been waiting naked in your bathtub.”

She laughed. “I’m not sure how Walt would have reacted.”

“I feel like it’s my job to teach Walt so many things. What would be wrong with a little education about where babies come from?”

“In a few years, that will be appropriate.” She yawned. “We have to sleep.” She wanted to lie there and keep touching him all night, but dawn came too early for things like that.

“I just want to lay here like this and hold you forever.”

Charlotte liked that idea. “Hold me while we sleep then.”

Earl smiled. “You don’t have to tell me twice.”

Chapter Ten

Earl spent much of the next day asking his men questions, one on one. "Did you know Howard?" he asked repeatedly.

Some had and some hadn't, but they all knew one thing about his wife's late husband. He was a mean one. He'd lost many of the men who were working for him because he'd threaten them, and once he'd even threatened to whip one of the Negroes who worked for him.

"What about his wife? Did he talk about her?" Earl asked the man who was rapidly becoming his right hand there at the ranch. He was experienced not only with ranching, but with this ranch in particular.

Peter shook his head. "You don't want to know what he said about your wife..."

"I do. People act as if she's done something evil. I need to know what was said about her so I can understand what kind of situation I'm in here." Earl knew the man would be the most likely to be the one to tell him. They'd become friends of sort in the time he'd been there.

"Well, according to Mr. Watkins, the old man who raised her would invite all his buddies over and they'd take turns with her while the old man watched," Peter said, not looking at Earl as he said the words. "Lots of men believed it, but I wasn't so sure. She's such a pretty little thing, and she kept to herself. I don't think she could have been treated like that and ended up such a good mama to her boy."

"He told her that no one wanted to even talk to her because

she'd worn britches when she was young and pretended to be a boy."

Pete laughed at that. "It's true that she did, but we all just felt dumb that we didn't realize she was old enough to be looking like a man, and she still looked like a boy. No one blames her for that at all."

"So, the way she's treated is due to the things her husband said about her and nothing else?"

"Definitely. His ma hated her something fierce. I think he told her the same things, because even at church, his ma looked at her like she'd just crawled out from under a rock."

"Why would a man speak that way about his own wife?" Earl knew the story was a lie, but he wasn't terribly surprised to hear that Howard had told it. The man was pure evil as far as he could see. He was just glad that he'd had the sense to treat Charlotte well. At least she felt she'd been treated well.

"He wanted to keep her for himself. He was old and not too good looking. Short little thing. Ugly as sin. Still not sure why she married him, but he made sure she wouldn't marry no one else after him."

"I can see that. Good thing I didn't hear the rumors, isn't it?"

"Sure is, boss." With that, Peter moved on down the fence they were mending, working on his own.

Earl wasn't certain if he should tell Charlotte the truth about the rumors spread about her, but he finally decided she had a right to know. She'd believed for years that people looked down on her because she'd grown up wearing pants. It couldn't have been further

from the truth.

When he got home that day, he washed his hands at the sink, listening to Walt and Charlotte. Walt was talking up a storm, barely letting Charlotte get a word in. “You talk a lot, son.”

Walt giggled. “You said you wanted me to talk. Now I talk.”

“I see that!” Earl leaned between mother and son. “What are you making for supper?”

“Open-faced roast beef sandwiches with mashed potatoes and peas,” Charlotte told him, turning her face to kiss her husband. “I found the receipt for it in my book, so I decided to make it. No one tells me what to cook anymore, and Walt and I felt like something new. Right, Walt?”

“That’s right!”

Earl was thrilled the boy was talking as much as he was. It really was a huge difference, now that he’d gotten out what he was afraid of.

“Well, I’m ready to try something new then!” His sister Susan had often experimented with strange dishes when he was growing up. Usually, he’d even liked them.

While Charlotte was putting the finishing touches on the meal, Walt jumped down and told Earl all about his day. “We went to visit the Mrs. Royals for a minute, and they have kittens. Four of them. They don’t need four kittens when we don’t even have one!”

“That’s very true,” Earl said, knowing where the conversation was going, but he liked cats, so he wasn’t going to complain even one little bit. “Was there one you liked better than the others?”

Walt nodded. “There was a little gray and white kitty, and I

think she should come live at our house. I asked Mama, but she said you would have to be asked about it. So, I'm asking. Can I have a kitten?"

"How much do they want for it?" Earl asked Charlotte. Back east kittens were given away, but here, they seemed to be a commodity. Everyone needed a barn cat or six.

"They want to give it to Walt, because he asked so nicely," Charlotte answered. When she turned from the counter with two plates, he could see she had tears in her eyes. She was obviously touched by the offer.

"Well, I think a kitten is a great idea. You need to have someone to keep you company while Walt and I are out doing manly things."

Walt nodded. "But it'll really be my kitten, but you can play with her too, Mama."

"Let's get a kitten then," Charlotte said with a smile. "I've always wanted a pet, but Howard said cats make him sneeze. Dogs too."

"Well, they don't make me sneeze, and I think a kitten or six would make all of us happy."

"Can we get them all, Papa?"

"I don't think we should take advantage of the Royals' generosity like that. One will be enough for us."

Walt sighed dramatically. "How about three?"

Earl laughed and ruffled the boy's hair. "We're going to start with one. What if they make your mama sneeze, and we don't even know it? We'd have to give your mama away, and do you know how

hard it is to find a new one?"

Walt giggled. "Yeah, we'd keep the kitten and give Mama away."

Charlotte put the last plate on the table and took her seat with her family. "You'd better find a kitten who can cook then."

"Maybe we should keep your mama, don't you think? No one else cooks quite like she does."

Seeming to consider it for a moment, Walt finally said, "I guess we can keep Mama."

"You're so kind," Charlotte said, shaking her head. "Was it your idea to get this boy talking?"

After the milking was done, they put Walt to bed together as they always did, and Earl waited until they were out of his son's room before discussing what had been on his mind all evening. "I think you need to know something I learned today."

"What's that?" she asked, taking his hand, and pulling him toward the parlor. What she really wanted was to simply take him to bed, but it was too early for that.

"I asked the men about your husband. And what kind of things he said about you."

"Uh oh. Did people think kindly of him?"

Earl shook his head. "No, he was hated by pretty much everyone. They said he was mean and always threatening the men who worked for him, going so far as to threaten to whip one of them."

"That's terrible! I had no idea."

"There's more," he said, dreading the next part of the

conversation they must have.

“Worse than that?”

“I think so.” He shook his head. “He told everyone in town that the man who raised you would invite men over, and they would take turns with you, with the old man watching.”

Charlotte’s jaw dropped. “Why would he say things like that about his own wife? That never happened. No one ever visited! Not once!”

“I know that, and you know that. If you’d been treated that way, you’d be scarred in ways no one can see, like my Patsy. No, he said it so no one would ever try to take you from him. Everyone said he was short and ugly...”

She shrugged. “He certainly wasn’t the most attractive man I ever met, but he wasn’t a bad man.”

“Are you sure about that?”

Sighing she shook her head. “No, it sounds like he was a bad man. A very bad man. I wish I’d known it was happening so I could argue with it. Does that mean that Ada and Cassandra have heard the rumors?”

“They most likely have, I’m sorry to say. But it also means they don’t believe them, or they wouldn’t be spending time with you.”

“I guess that’s true.”

“I can’t believe he lied about me that way.” She looked at him, a thought occurring to her. “You don’t believe the rumors, do you?”

“Not one little bit. How could I?” He wrapped his arm around her, pulling her toward them. “And even if they were true, they

wouldn't bother me. I think you're a good mother and an even better wife. It doesn't matter much what brought you to this point in your life. I will help you get rid of the rumors, though. It's the least I can do."

"You've been so good to Walt and me. I've never known anyone who was kind just for the sake of kindness and not trying to get something in return."

"I hope you realize I'm kind to you because I love you, and not just because I think I should be." He shook his head. "I had no idea you and Walt would make me fall in love so quickly."

She grabbed him in a bear hug, holding him close. "I love you too. I thought I loved Howard, but I think I just became used to him. You? I love you with everything inside me. It shouldn't have happened so fast, but it did, and I can't regret even one moment of you in my life."

"Didn't we agree to go slowly on all this the day I arrived? Weren't we both in love with people who had passed?"

"We both thought we were. Now we know better."

He chuckled. "I'll always love Patsy a little, but you're right. It's very different than the love I feel for you. I think I put Patsy on a pedestal. I would never do that with you, because I so badly want to drag you down and have my way with you."

"As long as you remember that if you have your way with me, it means I'm also having my way with you."

"Never thought of it that way, but I guess you're right." He leaned down and kissed her once more. "Didn't you say something

about wanting a daughter? I think we should go practice making one.”

“Great idea!” Charlotte jumped to her feet. “Race you to the bedroom!”

“I’ll let you win, because I win either way.”

Earl watched her run toward the bedroom and realized that his hard-working only serious wife had changed completely in the short while they’d been married, as had her son. He couldn’t wait to see what they’d be like in a year!

Epilogue

Earl stood behind his wife, who was staring out the window at the snow falling. "I'm ready for spring," she complained.

"As I remember, spring wasn't a great deal warmer than this," he said. "Besides, I think you tricked me."

She turned toward him, wrapping her arms around him. "How did I trick you?" She wanted to pull him into the bedroom and make love with him, but she'd given birth too recently. Her midwife had told her to keep her hands off her husband for at least a little while.

"You told me you wanted a daughter, and I was as helpful as I could possibly be to make that happen."

"Oh, you were. You were absolutely wonderful. But I still don't know how I tricked you!"

"You said you wanted *one* daughter. Last I counted, you gave birth to two of them. *Two!* How am I supposed to watch over both of them?"

She chuckled. "Walt will help. He already loves them more than life itself." She rested her head against his shoulder. "I sure hope we don't have two babies every year. I think one every couple of years would be better, but we're starting off strong!"

He sighed. "Next time, we're not doubling up. You hear me?"

"I guess. I do think we might need to keep our hands off each other if we want to make sure there are no more twins..."

"Never going to happen. How much longer until we can...return to our favorite activity?" he asked.

“Midwife says six weeks, so that means two more.” Charlotte sighed. “I was hoping it would be yesterday.”

“Well, I guess we want you properly healed before anything else happens.”

“Probably.” She grinned up at him, pulling his head down for a kiss. “We’ll have to practice kissing while we wait.”

“I sure do love you. Did you know I almost refused to read your letter? I’m so glad I followed my heart out here and gave it to you.”

Charlotte smiled. “I don’t know what we’d do without you!”

To receive notice of future books, send a text to 42828.

If you enjoyed the story, please consider reviewing.